

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 18, 2021

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance, OSB

Jer 23:1-6; Eph 2:13-18; Mk 6:30-34

It's been quite a week, hasn't it? Last Sunday was the jubilee celebration; Tuesday we had Mary Fran's funeral and burial. We had out-of-town company for three days, and a wedding on the property on Thursday, the same day on which the City council zoning committee considered and approved the community's request for a zoning change. My work has been overwhelming and stressful as I try to plan fall programming in this weird new world of some in person, some online, and some hybrid. I know that I am not alone in feeling not up to the task I find before me.

Jesus gets the weariness. As we meet him in today's gospel, he's had a week or two himself. We've heard stories from the gospel of Mark for the last six Sundays. Mark told us about how Jesus taught the crowds, calmed the storm at sea, healed Jairus's daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage, was rejected at home in Nazareth, and last week (we had different readings, so no worries if that doesn't sound familiar), commissioned the Twelve. What immediately precedes today's passage, though not in the lectionary, is the horrifying murder of John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin. It's really no wonder that he got the hungry disciples on a boat and headed to a deserted place. He gets the weariness, for sure.

Despite what must have felt like a visceral need for time and space, prayer and reflection, he responds compassionately to the unexpected crowd he sees when he gets off the boat. I know I wouldn't have been as gracious. Both Mark and Matthew say that his heart was moved with pity for them though Matthew drops "for they were like sheep without a shepherd." A quick check of the Google machine reveals that, without a shepherd, sheep are "unlikely to last long." They will follow the rest of the flock into dangerous terrain or into the vicinity of a predator who can pick them off with little resistance. Without a shepherd to help them find food or water, they starve; without a shepherd to trim their wool and hooves, they will probably get sick with parasites or become lame. So in spite of his own weariness, Jesus sees the crowd's (and our) inability to figure it all out for ourselves.

This story is in all of the synoptic gospels, so I also looked at Luke. That writer, interestingly, doesn't include the bit about pity but says that Jesus "received" the crowd. Out in a deserted place, Jesus assumes the role of host, providing welcome, warmth, and a sense of belonging, home. It's what we see in the 2nd half of Psalm 23 which Judy just sang: "You set a table before me . . . anoint my head with oil . . . my cup overflows."

The message and mandate here isn't terribly mysterious. I should take my weariness, my sheepishness, my need that drives me to do things as desperate as trying to beat Jesus to wherever he was going, directly to Jesus. It's staggering how often I forget to do so, or think that somehow I'm better than the average sheep. I will be received with compassion.

But I also need to be ready to receive others, to notice their weariness and respond with a hospitable presence. Generosity isn't above and beyond; it's the gospel, the good news. I often forget that, too.

Indeed, it has been a week, a week that makes me think of that lovely Scottish hymn, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say." My today be a sabbath, one that echoes the 2nd verse of that hymn:

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live.
I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.