

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**18 July 2021**

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

I want to share with you the story of Christy Henrich. When Christy was a teenager, she ranked among America's best gymnasts. Even though Christy was 95 pounds and 4-foot-11 inches, a judge told her in 1977 that she was too fat to make the 1988 Olympic team. Christy began starving herself, sometimes eating no more than an apple or just an apple slice a day. If she ate more, she would force herself to vomit. Despite of all this training, Christie missed making the Olympics by a fraction of a point. Thanks to nine-hour training days, however, she placed fourth in the uneven parallel bars in 1989's world championships in Stuttgart, Germany. Unfortunately, Christie continued to starve herself and by early 1994 she weighed no more than 50 pounds. Christie died of multiple system failure on July 26, 1994. She was 22 years old.

Let us review where we are in Mark, and we will get back to Christie later on. Jesus once again failed to have much of an impact in his own hometown. The people he had grown up with knew him so well that they took offense to the son of Mary pretending to have higher wisdom than the teachers of the law. Jesus left Nazareth and continued to teach and preach in the local villages. At some point, Jesus sent his disciples two by two to preach and heal in local towns, giving them the power to exorcise, heal, and preach. We know that the ministry of Jesus and his disciples was so successful that even the royal house of Herod Antipas began to wonder about this Jesus. We also heard how Herod had John the Baptist killed at the request of his wife Herodias. The passage today begins when the disciples return from their very successful mission.

The passage starts with, "The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." After a long and arduous mission, the disciples and Jesus need some rest. They had been very busy with much "coming and going" and seldom had any "leisure even to eat." They were surrounded by people all day long, pulled in all directions. Ministry is an all-consuming job that goes well beyond an 8-hour day. Jesus must have seen the exhaustion on their faces, the weariness in their eyes, the physical tiredness in their bodies. Yet, Jesus also saw the excitement and the joy that preaching the Gospel brings to a person. He saw the energy and the satisfaction that a job well-done produce. Now, Jesus knows that workers must replenish their energy and rest their bodies, minds, and souls otherwise they become dry, overworked, resentful, and eventually burn-out. It is for this reason that Jesus and his disciples get in a boat and go to a deserted place all by themselves.

Unbeknown to Jesus and his disciples, “many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.” By the time Jesus and the disciples arrive to their place of rest, they “saw a great crowd.” Mark tells us that Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus saw the stress, the despair, and the great need on the crowd’s faces. He saw men and women in need of physical healing, many of them poor and unable to seek the treatment of doctors. Jesus saw many in great need of spiritual healing, overwhelmed by their sin, beaten down by the choices they had made in their lives, and attempting unsuccessfully to fight their demons without anyone to help. Jesus saw many who needed emotional healing. People caught up in the rat race of everyday life, trying hard to be all things to all people, desperately seeking self-esteem in the wrong places, caught-up in a treadmill that led nowhere. He looked at the crowds and he saw anguish.

Jesus and his disciples were exhausted, yet Jesus felt compassion. The Good Shepherd knows that the crowds were directionless, desperate, and in great danger, as sheep who wander off often are. Now Jesus begins a treatment plan. He begins to help this desperate crowd in several important ways. First, Mark tells us that Jesus “began to **teach** them many things.” Second, he will **feed** thousands of them in the passage that follows. (Mark 6:35-44). Third, he will **save or protect** them by calming a terrible storm that threatens the lives of the disciples (Mark 6:45-52). And fourth, Jesus will **heal** them. Mark tells us that “wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” These are the tasks that God as Good Shepherd in Jeremiah 29 and Ezekiel 34 will perform. Jesus is the fulfillment of those passages.

Jesus teaches, feeds, protects, and heals the crowds who are directionless, stressed, harassed, and sick in body, mind, and soul. I believe there is a deep connection between the passage from Mark and the Old Testament, not just the Good Shepherd passages of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but also Leviticus and Numbers. Many miss this connection, including some preachers. When sheep wander off and become harassed, threatened, or exhausted from wandering, the shepherd places the sheep in a sheep-pen. He provides boundaries. As long as the sheep remain within the boundaries provided by the shepherd they will be safe, fed, healthy, and protected. Now, we read the curious phrase at the end of this passage that when sick people, “touched even the fringes of his cloak” they were healed. The word “fringes” here doesn’t just mean the border of his tunic. The word “fringes” corresponds to four tassels that were placed on four sides of a Jewish tunic. The tassels or fringes were often blue pieces of ribbon. The tradition was to tie 613 knots on the ribbon, which corresponded to the 365 prohibitions (the “Thou-Shall-Not”) and the 248 affirmations (the “Thou Shall”) requirements of the law of Moses. The requirement comes from Numbers 15:37-40. “The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not

follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So, you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God.”

In the Old Testament the Law of Moses provided the boundaries for the people of Israel who were often like sheep in need of a shepherd. The tassels on their tunics and on prayer shawls reminded people of these commandments and provided a way back from the wanderings of the human heart. With Jesus of Nazareth, we no longer need all these laws. As the woman with a hemorrhage was healed by touching the fringes of Jesus’ tunic, so are the people in today’s story healed just by touching Jesus. Healing and restoration no longer come from obeying all the laws of Moses, but through a relationship with Jesus of Nazareth.

My friends, let me go back to the story of Christy Henrich. Christie was caught up in a no-win struggle for perfection, which ultimately led to her death. Many of us too are workaholics, trying to please everybody. We drive while holding our cellphone on one hand, a cheeseburger on the other, and our right knee to the steering wheel, trying to be in all places at once. Many of us attempt to find self-esteem by starving ourselves to death physically, spiritually, or emotionally. The good news of the Gospel today is that our self-esteem is dependent on what God has done for us in Jesus and not on what we do for ourselves. If Jesus died to save us, then we must be worth saving. If God loves us this much, then we must be worth loving and we must love ourselves. Many of us attempt to find the significance and meaning of our lives in busy-ness, perfectionism, and a fruitless attempt to be all things to all people. In the meantime, we walk around like sheep without a shepherd: stressed out, directionless, and overwhelmed. Today, Mark reminds us that the meaning of our lives comes when we come face to face with Jesus of Nazareth and accept his teaching, his feeding, his protection, and his healing. Today I invite you to take a break, enjoy life and rest. Accept this Jesus and touch the fringe of his cloak. Only He can give you the rest and the significance you need.

May he continue to bless you. Amen!