

A Change of Plans
July 18, 2021
Rev. John Chaplin

The reading for this Sunday is separated into two distinct sections. The first section being a report of the disciples on their mission throughout the surrounding villages. The second section provides a summary of Jesus' activities in and around a place called Gennesaret.

In that first section, the disciples, who on their missionary journey traveled in separate pairs, need a debriefing. No doubt weary from their adventures, but with some awesome stories to tell of healings and teachings, they report to Jesus. He listens for a time and then, sensing their exhaustion and sensing his own, proposes that they get away to a deserted place for a rest—seems like a good and reasonable idea! The crowds are so constant that there has been no suitable time or place even to eat. Jesus and the disciples get into a boat and head down to the shore to a favorite spot for a well-deserved moment of peace and quiet, a time for the renewal of the spirit as well as the body.

But the crowds are not so easily diverted. They keep an eye on the boat and hurry ahead to the “favorite spot”, arriving even before Jesus and the disciples. Their presence plays havoc with those plans to retreat. The crowds are constantly there interrupting the process.

Jesus and the disciples surely have reason for impatience, but the text says that when Jesus saw the crowd, “he had compassion for them. The crowd becomes the object of Jesus' deep concern. He observes their wandering, their desperation as persons without direction, and he begins to teach them. Jesus interprets, Jesus instructs, and Jesus guides them to envision a better way. In time, he will dismiss the crowds and find his own moment alone to pray, but not before serving as the shepherd.

As I was doing some reading and reflecting on our scripture today I ran across something called the “River Story”. There are different versions of it; some refer to it as the “public health parable”.

It is a favorite among community organizers urging others to not just figure out how to meet the immediate needs of folks but to ask the hard questions about why they are in need in the first place.

It goes like this:

There was once a villager that noticed another person floating down the river. The villager quickly pulled the person from the river to keep them from drowning. The next day, this same villager noticed two more people in the river. The villagers created teams and shifts to endlessly pull drowning folks from the river. Despite their commitment, the numbers of drowning people increased each day. One day, someone asked “Why are

all of these people drowning? We need to go upstream and find out who is throwing them in the river!”

So, please understand that I am not offering that story as a suggestion as to where a faith community might concentrate their outreach on...whether it be at the point of greatest distress downstream or at the very source of the scenario upstream. In fact, I have a couple of my own personal challenges with this story!

First, the story seems to represent those who are harmed as powerless victims. But folks are rarely entirely powerless, and I think we should not approach folks as if they were powerless.

Secondly, if all the rescuers take off upstream to investigate the source, in the meantime the bodies will continue to float by. If we're so busy running along the bank to find the source of the problem, who is going to help those who are at risk of drowning??

No easy answers, but maybe that story (and our scripture) is a reminder that we ALL need to rest, recharge, and restore ourselves in order to be fully equipped for the work of restoration and transformation that Christ calls us to do. Everywhere they went, the disciples and Jesus were met with need.

Need of knowledge. Need of healing. Need of sustenance. Day after day, the river brought them more folks in need of their time and attention. The need was never ending for them as it is for so many today.

Imagine the reality for medical professionals across the world for the past 15 or so months now. Makeshift morgues, isolation from friends and family, hostility to medical advice, lack of PPE, devastated loved ones of patients, non-stop exposure to pain and death, and ever changing government “guidance”.

“Initially some physicians found a great sense of purpose in assisting in the pandemic, and having a strong sense of purpose is vital for resilience. However, as time continued, the same system challenges exist, but new threats were imposed to individual and family safety, finances, and job security. Everyone’s regular routines—physicians and others—were disrupted in a significant and prolonged way.”

Like the disciples, we can imagine today’s medical and support folks trying to steal away for a precious minute to do something as simple as eat, and being way-laid by the next crisis. This is a reality for so many that see themselves, or are perceived by others, as essential to the survival or thriving of their community. This is a burden carried by organizers, teachers, healers, caregivers, leaders, and so many others that carry the weight of someone else’s needs. The disciples, and Jesus in particular, were intimately familiar with this responsibility as they faced the constant cry for healing.

Back in August of 2019, at the beginning of the school year, a photo showing two little boys holding hands went viral. Conner, an autistic boy entering the 2nd grade, was going to school alone for the first time. Although the bus trip went well, when he arrived at school, he froze with fear and started to cry; he hid in a corner, unable to walk into

the building. Christian, another boy, saw Conner and went to comfort him. Then he took Conner by the hand and led him inside the building. “He found me and held my hand, and I got happy tears,” Conner later told a reporter. Conner’s mother said, “Christian is Conner’s first real friend—they have an inseparable bond.”

A white boy named Conner huddled in a corner, a Black boy named Christian—reaching out to help him. Sort of an updated American parable—a Jesus tenderly leading a frightened boy toward a new world. “This is my commandment,” said Jesus, “that you love one another as I have loved you...You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12-14).

Diana Butler Bass, in her book “Freeing Jesus”, says this:
“When I think of friendship with Jesus, I imagine that hand extended. It happens in different ways, of course. Sometimes, the hand is part of an ancient story, the hand of Jesus outstretched to embrace little children or to invite us to follow him. But more often it is the hand of another person. When I feel afraid, huddled in a corner, unable to move forward, it is the hand that reaches out to comfort me, remind me that I am not alone, or guide me toward the next step on my journey.”

Friendship is not just for friends. Friendship is for the good of the world. We, as Christians, get it that God’s Word is embodied in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Less often do we imagine that God’s word is embodied in the lives of our fellow kindred. Flawed, broken, imperfect that we ALL are—and yet not entirely powerless! We are intimately tied to each other. We find God through each other.

May we endeavor to stand in the gaps for each other and decide to be relentless in our support, in our witness, and in our friendship.

To care for each other and not leave each other behind. Even if that involves just one single struggling individual in that river of life.

Thanks be to God!

