



Hear the Word

from Pastor Paul E. Hoffman

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

July 22, 2018

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I have a friend who, like me, has spent considerable time in the Midwest. If you've ever lived there, or if you have connections there at all, you likely know that a lush, green lawn throughout the summer is a prized possession. All sorts of bragging rites go with that, and – let's be honest – what home owner doesn't love a bit of a reason to brag every now and again?

At any rate, my friend had a neighbor down the street – corner lot – who always – always! – had the greenest lawn of all. It was just beautiful. Perfectly manicured and nicely appointed with shrubs and flowers. But it was the green, weedless grass that seemed to really set things off.

Frustrated with dragging bag after bag of Weed-Be-Gone and Scott's Dandelion Killer and a host of other preventative remedies around his lawn in a quest for a lawn that might somehow measure up, my friend finally swallowed his pride, went to his neighbor and ask for the secret.

"Feed the grass."

What?

"Feed the grass."

But what about the weeds? What about the grubs? What about crabgrass, and the dandelions?

"Feed the grass."

Could it really be that simple? Is that really the secret to a great lawn?

Could it be the secret for *more* than just a great lawn? The Gospel points us in that direction today. In a word, Jesus is feeding the grass. He is taking care of business.

Are you remembering from last week the gory story of the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin? Today's Gospel is like a giant parenthesis around that story in the sixth chapter of Mark. If you didn't know that the horrific beheading story was in there, and just heard only what was read of chapter six, you might think – how pedestrian. Not a whole lot extraordinary happening. Jesus appears to be doing nothing more than feeding the grass. Doing what it takes to bring rich, lush, abundant life in the midst of a world-gone-mad that is swirling around him.

Look with me for just a moment at some of what today's Gospel reports:

It starts with Jesus suggesting a bit of R and R following the disciples' first healing and teaching

It continues with a boat ride to try to avoid the crowds of people who are becoming increasingly interested in Jesus, or at least in his powerful teaching and healing

Jesus looks out over that crowd and, the Gospel reports, *had compassion for them because they are like sheep without a shepherd.*

He taught them many things.

[Then comes the part of chapter six where the compelling stories of John the Baptist and the Feeding of the Five Thousand occur. But those are missing in our reading for today.]

Our reading for today concludes after another boat ride.

The people bring their sick into the market places (can you imagine this at, say, Ikea or Whole Foods?), and then it concludes the chapter with perhaps one of the most mundane, down-to-earth, feed-the-grass kind of sentence you could imagine:

Wherever Jesus went – villages, cities, farms – he brought healing to all who touched even the fringe of his cloak.

It's just not very exciting stuff. It is the report of an ordinary, faithful, servant and healer, following in the way that God has called him. You can slice it any way you want, but Jesus is not doing anything all that radical. He is feeding the grass. Doing what he was called to do.

So we have my friend's Midwestern neighbor on the corner lot with the green, green lawn. We have Jesus the Savior, doing the everyday things of life: reaching out in compassion, spending time with his buddies, counseling rest and renewal, extending a healing hand to those who need it.

What about us? What about *us*?

Because that's really what church is about, after all, isn't it? Isn't church, among other things, like praise and fellowship and offering, really about helping one another figure out how these ancient stories about Jesus from the Gospels somehow make sense for our lives. What difference does this story of Mark make to us, these two thousand years later, in a land and with a people so different that first century Palestine?

What about us? "Feed the grass." Feed the grass.

Maybe, just maybe, what Mark wants us to know about Jesus is that Jesus knows how to get down to it, to the important stuff. He knows that in the midst of a world swirling around him that is murderous, and hungry – desperate for meaning and purpose one might say – in that kind of world Jesus knows to feed the grass. *He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.*

I wonder how our world might be a different sort of place to live in if, just like they taught us in Sunday School, we followed Jesus? What if we got busy and fed the grass? Seriously. What if we had compassion on one another? What if we taught one another many things, sharing the rich diversity of the human family, instead of striving to protect all that is "ours."? What if, like Jesus, we made it a point wherever we went to extend a hand of healing? If our lives so radiated the love and compassion of the one in whose name we gather that just by being in our presence, people felt better. More whole. Healed. What if we took the time to simply rest in one another's company after a job

well done, rather than rush on to the next thing as if we were the only ones in the world who could actually accomplish something?

More than anything, Jesus shows us in this text today that when we feed the grass, good things happen. Jesus is taking the strength of God's good creation and making it stronger. Christ is looking for the best in people and doing whatever he can to lift them, to encourage them, to make them strong. And by them, of course, I mean us. Jesus is lifting *us*, encouraging *us*, strengthening *us*.

That is who we are, you and I. We are men, women, and children of the compassionate shepherd. We are the ones upon whom God in Christ has placed the responsibility to do the next compassionate thing, one to another.

Feed the grass.

In the name of the Father, and of the (✠) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.