# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Our Shepherd’s Heart”**

**Mark 6:30-44**

 **February 7, 2021**

“This is the Good News about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.” These are the opening words of Mark as he begins his gospel, the story of Jesus’ ministry here on earth. Today we are in the sixth chapter where Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to do ministry. We pick up the story in verse thirty as the disciples return from their short-term mission trip. I invite you to join me in Mark 6:30-44

The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. Then Jesus said, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.” He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn’t even have time to eat. So they left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone. But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and got there ahead of them. Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat.” But Jesus said, “You feed them.” “With what?” they asked. “We’d have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!” “How much bread do you have?” he asked. “Go and find out.” They came back and reported, “We have five loaves of bread and two fish.” Then Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of fifty or a hundred. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people. He also divided the fish for everyone to share. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish. A total of 5,000 men and their families were fed.

After his disciples returned from preaching, casting out demons, and healing, Jesus invited them to come with him to a quiet place where they could rest. But the crowd tracked them down and, instead of sending them away, Jesus spent time with them. He did so because he felt compassion for them. Not simply because they were needy people but because they were “like sheep without a shepherd.” Mark is not simply speaking poetically here. He is drawing our attention to the biblical practice of referring to the leaders of Israel as shepherds. When Moses gathered the Israelites in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land and knowing he was about to die, he prayed that the people would not be “like sheep which have no shepherd.” The Lord answered Moses’ prayer with Joshua. Later, the prophet Ezekiel noted that although there were kings in Israel, the people “were scattered for lack of a shepherd” because the kings were abusing them rather than caring for them. He envisioned the day when God himself would shepherd his people through a descendant of David, a reference to the coming Messiah. Enter Jesus, the Good Shepherd who has compassion for his sheep. He fulfills the shepherd’s role by first teaching them many things, bringing nourishment to their souls, and then feeding them, bringing nourishment to their bodies. He knows them and he cares about them.

Do you ever feel like no one cares for you – really cares for you – because they don’t fully understand you and are unaware of your deepest needs? Jesus understands you and knows your every need, and he feels compassion for you. Something about you touches something deep in his shepherd’s heart. And he knows that left to our own devices, seeking answers to life’s questions and fulfillment in life’s journey and comfort for life’s hardships, all in our own strength, that we are like sheep. We are like needy, uncertain, foolish, lost sheep. And he begins ministering to us, teaching and feeding us, rather than pushing our bleating, complaining and demanding selves away.

The disciples looked at what was going on with all these lost sheep, much as we look at each other and even at ourselves, and they saw problems. First, the place was remote. There was nothing in that place that indicated any possibility of finding something to eat. Second, the hour was late. It was getting close to dinner time and, because of problem number one, nothing could be done about it in this place. Bringing these two problems to Jesus, he adds a third: “You feed them.” Well, they have neither the resources nor the nearby grocery store whereby they can obey Jesus’ command. How much help are five loaves and two fish? It seems hopeless. The only answer is to send the people away, to let them fend for themselves as best they can.

How much are we like the disciples when it comes to having a relationship with Jesus? The place is remote - I’m beyond help. Surely Jesus knows how much I’ve messed up my life, how deep some of my sins are. The hour is late – you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. I’m pretty set in my ways and I doubt even Jesus can change me. We only have five loaves and two fish – I have so little to offer Jesus; I doubt that he can use me. We see the problems of our lives and they cause us to keep Jesus at a distance. I’m sure if he really knew me he’d send me away; that’s how the disciples thought Jesus should handle the problem of the crowd. But where we see problems Jesus sees opportunities. It’s not that Jesus is unaware of all that’s wrong with us. It’s just that he is in the business of taking lost sheep and gathering them to himself, in order to teach them and to feed them.

He teaches us that we’re not beyond help but that through him our sin can be forgiven. He teaches us that by his Holy Spirit who lives in us we can be changed, learning how to live in a new way and according to a new purpose. He teaches us that no matter what we bring to him, he is able to use it and multiply it for his kingdom purpose. All we need to do is to take a seat on the green grass and let him be our Shepherd, the One who ensures that we have everything we need, the One who leads us beside quiet waters and makes us lie down in green pastures, the One who restores our soul.

What do we have to offer him? We have ourselves, limited and messed up as we may be, as lost as any sheep. Jesus will accept us, as we are, teaching and feeding us so that we can live into our new life in his new kingdom. But, we have to offer, for Jesus can’t use what we don’t offer. Hold back your life from Jesus and you will remain lost. Give it to him and he will return it to you, new and fresh and ready to live in his abundance.