IT'S NOT ABOUT US
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Mark 6:30-56

Thank you for invitation, good to be back here in a familiar place with many familiar faces

As you heard, I went to a Mennonite seminary and now work for a Mennonite agency, so forgive me if I start with a Mennonite example. I recently read a piece written by the head of the Mennonite Church, who is retiring after many years as a pastor and church administrator. He was sharing his learnings from his years in the church. The one that he concluded with? "It's not about us." After all of the work he has put into the church, and all of his learnings, he finally concludes, it's not about us? If it's not about us, who is it about?

In this morning's reading, the disciples have just returned from being sent out, two by two, to cast out demons and heal people of their illnesses. They are now called "apostles," because they have been "sent out" (αποστολω).

Then, in the very next verse, they attempt to go to a quiet place and rest. They haven't even had time to eat. Except that tons of people beat them to the remote location to which they're headed. I don't know about you, but that would drive me nuts, especially if I'm hungry and grumpy already! Somehow big crowds and retreats don't mesh in my mind. Yet, Jesus "had compassion" on them – the word for compassion refers to being moved in your inmost part of your being, your innards! Quite a different response than the hungry rumblings of the disciples' stomachs!

So Jesus proceeds to teach the crowds "many things" and then tells the disciples to feed everyone who's gathered there. Now, let's remember the context here. These poor disciples (and Jesus, for that matter) are tired, they still haven't gotten their much-deserved retreat time, they still haven't even had a chance to eat – remember, they were hungry when this long day started, and now Jesus is asking them to feed everybody else. The disciples have had enough, and they protest that they would have to work for months to be able to feed all these people.

Which is a very realistic thing to say, if all they can see is what *they* can or can't do, to bring about a change in their situation, a change in the world. If it's not about us, who is it about?

Jesus doesn't seem to get sidetracked by their tendency to rely on themselves. He simply asks them what they have – how much bread, how many fish. They report back the pitiful but no doubt honest answer: five loaves of bread and two fish. Now, even if those loaves and fish met today's McDonald Super Size Me portion standards, five loaves and two fish wouldn't be enough to feed more than 30 or 40 people at the most. Problem is, the disciples are looking out at 5000 people at a minimum.

Again, Jesus doesn't seem to mind. He proceeds to organize people into groups of 50 and 100, looks up to heaven and blesses the bread, in a move not so unlike his breaking of the bread a little later on, at the Passover meal that we call the Last Supper.

Note what happens next and especially, note who is doing it: Jesus keeps giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it. It is Jesus who is the source of the food, the sustenance, that multiplies infinitely – on and on and on. He could, of course, have just handed it all out himself. He didn't need the disciples, but he chooses to work through them to accomplish his work, to reveal who God really is. And – here's the key: the disciples need *him*. Without God, the bread wouldn't multiply. Without God they would still be trying to divide five loaves into 5000+ crumbs! And the bread did multiply – we're told there are 12 baskets of leftovers – that's more than they started with!

Now, some who look at this passage try to point to the human action in this story, and say that when those first five people handed over their loaves to the disciples, that everyone else started opening up their lunchboxes and sharing too, and suddenly there was enough for everyone. Now, I happen to like that idea a lot – but I also think there's more than that going on. I hope that we don't limit the story to that version.

For me, the key question is whether we allow God to be at the center of the story (and the story that we live out in each day of our lives) and let everything else be defined according to that reality, or whether we focus on our own experiences and beliefs and fit God into those? The key question is whether we put God at the center of the story or whether we focus on our own beliefs and fit God into those.

A Christian friend of mine said to me recently, "for me, what's most important is that everybody has the 'right idea' (which I'm guessing he would define as a just and peaceful world) and it doesn't really matter what motivates people to get to that point. For me, it's my faith. But lots of people don't believe in God at all and still work at that same idea – and *that's* what really matters."

I agree with my friend's thoughts, to a point. I firmly believe that God is bringing about the reign of God on earth here and now – and it will be full of justice and peace once it is fully realized. And I think it's really important that we not lose sight of the fact that God can use anyone, not just people who claim to be God's followers, in bringing about this vision. We should never cut ourselves off from working with others who want to head in the same direction that we see God pointing. In fact, I work on a nearly daily basis with such people – from a variety of backgrounds and faith traditions, or no faith traditions at all, but sharing a common perspective on what makes for a better world.

But at the same time, I have to wonder if my friend is not putting the wrong thing at the center of his belief system. Right now, it is centered around an idea – a dream of a just and peaceful world. I happen to think that's a great idea – much better than many I have heard – but nonetheless it is still an idea, and subject to many different interpretations and realities. I would argue that rather than putting an idea at the center of our lives, we need to keep God at the center. God *is* the idea. And God is the standard by which we measure our ideas. Otherwise we are simply taking an idea and defining it in a way that feels "comfortable" for us. And if we are not constantly rooting ourselves in this wonderful and complex God, we will always be much more prone to deciding on the version that each one of us likes best. All six billion of us.

Because it is only through God, and the complex and wonderful ways in which God reveals God's self, that we can even begin to understand what a just and peaceful world looks like. And what does it look like? I think Greg Boyd sums it up well – the reign of God looks like Jesus, which means it looks like sacrificial love, being willing to relate to others in a power-

under way, rather than a power-over way. For us as Christians, that helps us begin to recognize when true justice and peace are taking place – and, when they're disguised as good ideas but being brought about in not-so-Christlike ways.

When I first started working in a church agency on public policy issues eleven years ago, I was tasked with working on issues like hunger, climate change and military aid to the country of Colombia. I worked hard at every one of these issues, and more, for years. And over the years one thing became clear to me—every single issue I was working on was getting worse, the longer I worked on it! I reached a point of complete burnout. I eventually realized that my theology had been way too human-centered – too focused on what I was supposed to be doing, how I could make the world a better place. In my point of burnout I had to admit that this really wasn't about me. It couldn't be about me. It's about something far bigger and better than my limited efforts.

I have learned to see the sentence, "it's not about us," as very good news, albeit one that I need to be reminded of daily. Coincidentally, when I returned to the office two years ago, I began working on a new set of issues. I now work on several issues that are much easier to resolve: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. housing meltdown \"/. Seriously, these issues are obviously just as intractable as what I was working on before, and probably even more so, and yet I work on them with a much greater sense of peace than I did before.

Why *do* we get so convinced that it's all about us, and try to re-make God in our image? The story in our text today isn't over quite yet, and I think it gives us some clues.

At the end of this very full day, Jesus sends the disciples to a nearby town, via boat. He sends the crowds away, too, and gets his well-deserved alone time, to pray. After praying, he notices a big storm has come up. But he doesn't go rescue them right away. If you read the text carefully, basically the whole night passes from when he first sees them struggling and when he walks on the water toward them. A whole night! Disciples, who are already exhausted, in a boat that is about ready to sink, in the middle of a storm, for an entire night! No thanks. I'd rather have my immediate Jesus fix – pray to God, get an immediate resolution of the problem. This may well be one reason why we try to fit God into our image – God doesn't always act the way we want God to act. It's much nicer to create a God that meets all of my needs, immediately, in the way that I expect.

A second reason, I think, is hubris – being convinced that we're right. To admit that some things are possible only with God – "for mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" -- requires some confession, repentance and humility. We might look down on those who think they have all the correct theological beliefs, all their ducks in the right theological row, but if we are honest, we are just as convinced that we know how to build a better world, and we spend much of our time doing it. In this passage, the disciples are called "hard-hearted." Earlier in Mark, this term is used for the "outsiders" who are not part of the Jesus movement. The disciples are no better than the outsiders. Talk about a need for humility! And yet we get so convinced that our version is right.

But behind the bluff of hubris, I believe, is fear. Fear that maybe we're not in control after all – and how can we be safe, if we're not in control? Fear that maybe God isn't who we think he/she is? And so it is safer to create a God in our image, who conforms to all of our current cultural beliefs and does what we think clearly needs to be done.

In our story, Jesus enters into the world of the disciples, who are experiencing great fear, as he walks across the water toward them. Interestingly, the text says that Jesus "intended to pass them by." Pass them by? After an entire night? If we look carefully at the word here, and if we remember our Old Testament texts, we know that a God who "passes over" the Israelites on the night of the Exodus, a God who "passes by" in a still, quiet whisper to Elijah on the mountain, this God is about to reveal God's very self to these terrified, exhausted disciples.

This is the God who intends to "pass them by," and who announces to them, "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid." Another way to translate "it is I" is "I AM," words which would have rung some bells for the disciples, who surely knew their Hebrew Scriptures well. Jesus is revealing his true self on a stormy night, to terrified and exhausted followers, reassuring them that he is indeed there and present with them, in the midst of the storm. In fact, in Exodus, when the divine name "I AM" is first revealed to Moses, God uses the very same verb form a few verses earlier to say "I will be with you." Because of this promise, we do not need to fear. We do not need to be in control. It doesn't have to be about us.

I've been reading the collection of letters from Mother Teresa's life. It's clear from the letters that she had considerable fear and anxiety about taking such a radical step as she did when she started the Missionaries of Charity. But the words she heard in her original call from God to do it stayed with her: Do not fear, I shall be with you. Trust me lovingly. Trust me blindly. Do not fear, I shall be with you. Trust me lovingly. Trust me blindly.

The text says that the disciples ended up being "astounded" as they experience Jesus passing them by. They reach the other shore of the lake, and not so unlike how our story started, immediately crowds of people see Jesus and start bringing him everyone who is sick and in need of healing.

Yes, it was up to the people to seek out Jesus for healing. But in the end, it is only when we touch, see, encounter Jesus–the living God–that the healing, the release from the need to be in control, happens.

It's not about us. It's about God, and what God is doing. And yes, often God wants a hand to help out–someone to hand out the loaves and fish. But let us never forget that it is God who is multiplying those loaves and fish, that it is God who is the source of our sustenance.

This God isn't content staying inside the confines we set up. The God revealed in Scripture is way beyond our taming, thanks be to God. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God." A life led by God will rarely be predictable. It will rarely be comfortable. But we do have the assurance that at the very core of who God is – it is in God's very name -- that God will be with us through it all. And that is reason for praise. Amen.