



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
July 21, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Recognizing Jesus"

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NRSV)

6:30 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." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.

6:53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And 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.

"Recognizing Jesus"

He said to them:

'Come away to a deserted place...and rest for a while.'

The disciples try to get away and find rest, but they cannot find rest.

Question for you: are you finding rest these days?

A related question: What do you do, when you cannot find rest, in an overwhelming time?

There was a meme floating around Presbyterian Facebook last weekend.

Are any of you on Presbyterian Facebook?

I don't recommend it. We are an anxious bunch.

- As my old pastor, the Rev. Dave Davis said in the sermon recently, Presbyterians are not their best selves when we are on Facebook.¹

This meme last weekend appeared a couple hours after the shooting at President Trump's rally:

It was a picture of a trashcan. And it said, everyone please place your sermon manuscripts here.

Meaning, of course, we needed to rewrite, in light of the shooting.

As I said last week, I choose not to rewrite. I'm not a Saturday sermon writer, if I can help it - the very thought of rewriting that late **stresses me out**.

And anyway, I'm a politically minded, justice-oriented Presbyterian pastor preaching to a politically minded, justice-oriented Presbyterian congregation, so my sermon still pretty much already fit the occasion.

If I do say so myself.

In fact, perhaps last week's sermon fit a bit too well. For those of you who missed it, (*shame on you*), but to catch you up: I talked about how living in this election season feels like drinking out of a firehose. I lamented how I'm reading and reading the news, listening and listening to the news. News all the time – all in an effort, to control that which I cannot control. I cannot get enough.

A funny thing happened, last week, after the sermon. So many of you came up, and said, 'Wow, yes. Thank you. That is what I needed to hear.'

And also, maybe some of you saw the stress on my face, last Sunday, when I was up here. Perhaps you heard the toll the summer of 2024 is taking on me. Because, more than a few of you also came up to me afterward and asked, 'Richard, are you okay?'

I mentioned that to my spouse Lindsey later that afternoon. And she said, 'Yea, you really did sound stressed up there. Really, are you okay?'

And the answer, of course, is *No*.

No. I'm not okay.

Is anyone okay, these days?

¹ Unfortunately, I cannot recall the specific sermon where I heard Dr. Davis speak about "Presbyterian Facebook." I would recommend all our congregation to the collection of his excellent sermons (and excellent sermons by other pastors at Nassau Church) found at <https://nassauchurch.org/worship/sermons/>.

Is the summer of 2024 taking its toll on you?

He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place...and rest for a while.'

But the disciples cannot find rest. Even in that deserted place, the crowds recognize Jesus. This happens twice in our passage. First in v. 30. Then a second time, after Jesus and the disciples take a boat to the other side of the lake, starting in v. 53. Before they can get out of the boat, the crowds recognize Jesus *again*. They surround him *again*. They bring their sick, and all who touched him were healed.

But the exhausted disciples can't catch a break.

In-between these two passages, the exhaustion of the disciples begins to show. The hours grow long, and the crowds get thicker.

'This is a deserted place,' they tell him, 'and the hour is now very late; send [the crowds] away.'

What they probably wanted to say was: 'We're all used up, Jesus! We're spent! We don't have anything else to give to these people. And would ya look time? It's well past dinner time. Don't you think it's about time to wrap this whole thing up, Jesus?'

The people keep coming and coming, needing and needing.

They bring their hunger.

They bring their sickness.

They ask to be made whole.

And the disciples find themselves running on empty.

Do you find yourself running on empty, these days?

A related question:

What do you do, when you cannot find rest, in an overwhelming time?

A curious thing, about this sense of losing control.

Sometimes it brings out the worst in us.

Have you seen the worst in us, lately?

Some, when they are feeling out of control, try to seize control, to their own and other's detriment:

Last weekend we all witnessed in real time a traumatic act of political violence that claimed the lives of two people and nearly took the life of the former President Trump.

To me, watching it, brought up memories of similar acts of political violence broadcast live before our eyes in recent years:

- The January 6th riots seeking to overturn the peaceful transfer of power.
- The ‘Unite the Right’ Nazi march and riot in Charlottesville
- And just this week, white supremacists waving Nazi flags on the streets of Nashville.

Would-be strong men seeking to disrupt the democratic process; take power out of the hands of the people; intimidate with force, and squash or bully away dissent.

It is both a cause, and an effect, of this time of overwhelm.

Feeling as if they are losing control, over and over again, you see it, people trying to bully, and control, and abuse their power to get what they want, no matter who they hurt in the process.

The disciples do it too, sometimes.

It’s a temptation running through all the Gospels:

- “Which of us is the greatest, Jesus?”
- “Which one of us will sit at your right side in the kingdom of heaven Jesus?”
- “Jesus, do you want us to call upon heaven to rain down fire on our enemies?”
- “Jesus, when they come out to arrest you, shall we draw our swords?”

I think that is still the same temptation we have today:

Trying to take control, trying to seize control, and in the process, dominating other people. In fact, it has been the biggest temptation, throughout the history of the church.

Over and over, the Body of Christ has confused itself with Christ himself. Over and over, the churches have said we have the only answer. And the only way you’re going to get to God is to believe like we do.

And there's a type of violence there too.

I get it. It's an overwhelming time. It's an overwhelming life.

And one that religious people do, when they feel overwhelmed, is to start thinking they're the only ones who've got it all figured out. And they point to themselves, instead of to Christ.

But, notice, that is not the disciples' reaction this time, to this overwhelming time, in our passage today.

Here, they fall back, and look instead to Jesus.

When the crowds ask for something to eat, in that deserted place, they turn to Jesus.

We don't read it in the lectionary today, but in-between our two passages, Jesus feeds the multitude: 5,000, using only 5 loaves and 2 fish. In Jesus's hands, it is enough. After all, he is the bread of life. He is the cup of salvation. Instead of trying to take charge, here, the disciples follow Jesus's lead, and take his bread to the people.

The disciples are not the source of the bread of life. Instead, they are the instruments; He is the vine; they are the branches. The disciples bring the bread of life to the people.

And as they go out: The disciples don't point to themselves, They don't say, 'We are the answer.' They don't claim they are the only hope for the world. They point back, they fall back, they lean on Jesus. When they were depleted, they looked to Christ as the source of their renewal.

And like them, as the body of Christ, we can follow their lead, and not point to ourselves, as if we have this all figured out.

Because we're not supposed to come to this place and act as if we have all the answers ourselves. We are given the task of being the church, but we are not it's savior.

- The church is the opposite of any strong man politician or party who says only I can fix what ails you.
- It's certainly the opposite of any act of political violence trying to manipulate the democratic system and take power out of the hands of the people.

- And the church fails to be the church when it devolves into Christian nationalism and seeks to legislate Christian beliefs as mandatory practices for all people. That is categorically un-Christian.

The church, when it is truly the church, does not claim superiority.

It acts in humility,

- always seeking to follow a Christ who never elevated the powerful,
- never resorted to violence even when force was used against him,
- but instead, in word and in deed, throughout his life, proclaimed peace, and love, and justice.

As disciples of that Christ, we point to him, and to his ways of love, grace, and peace. And we pray, that by the grace of God, others will recognize this Christ in our midst, in the ways we move in this world.

This week, amid all that happened this week, we passed the 4th anniversary of passing of John Lewis, lawmaker and Civil Rights icon.

In the summer of 2020, when John Lewis died, our nation was in the middle of the pandemic. We were also in the midst of one of the greatest modern reckonings with racial discrimination in this country, following the televised murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers.

You may remember that in the days immediately following his death, *The New York Times* published a posthumous editorial by Lewis, written from the hospital in the last days of his life.²

In the midst of upheaval, in the face of violence, in a time of overwhelm, Lewis wrote in that editorial a message of thanks:

While my time here has now come to an end, he said, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me.

He said, that in his final week, I had to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, though I was admitted to the hospital the following day. I just had to see and feel it for myself that, after many years of silent witness, the truth is still marching on.

² John Lewis, "Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of America." *The New York Times*. July 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>

And he urged his readers, to keep marching in that truth: *Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community.*

You see, at the end of his life, John Lewis pointed not to himself, taking a victory lap of all his good work. Instead, he said he was inspired by a new generation. And he pointed, not to himself, but to the way of justice, peace, and truth:

Democracy is not a state. He told us. It is an act.

I think the same could be said, by the way, for the church. The church is not a state. It is not a thing at all. It is an action. It's a way of being in the world.

Christ is bigger than the church. And that is good news because it means we don't always have to have tall he answers. We don't always have to be right. We don't have to exhaust ourselves. And we certainly don't have to force others think and act as we do.

In a time of overwhelm, instead, what we are asked to do, is to fall back, not on our own depleted resources, but on Christ, the one who said 'Come to me, all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.'

And when we rely on Christ, and not ourselves, that is how we find our strength.
To proclaim peace in a time of war.
To advocate for justice for all those pushed aside.
To support the weary and to feed the hungry.

Because we know that peace, that justice, that support, that bread of life, they do not have to spring from our inner resources; they come from a deeper source.

He is the bread of life. We are his instruments.

It all comes from the Christ who is in our midst. The Christ who appears in our midst.

It is Christ who will carry us through, who is carrying us through.

"And all who touched him were healed." Thanks be to God.