

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

October 6, 2024

THE GOOD NEWS:
Do This
Dr. Jo Forrest

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You may commit to memory the events, places, names, and commands in our Bibles. If merely knowing the Bible motivates, you may win at *Jeopardy* and remain untouched.

If you read the Bible to discover about God, how God creates, what God does, and what God calls us *to do*, you find a whole new dimension of truth.

If that excites you, you'll never plumb its entirety, nor in your doing exhaust the way you become what truly delights God. When we discover God inhabiting our lives, God changes us.

I gladly confess that this later pursuit of scripture compels me. With that in mind, bear with me on a geeky-Bible exercise that sounds more like the merely "knowing" task.

If you create a bar chart from the verses in Mark's gospel comparing what Jesus teaches and those that narrate Jesus demonstrating the good news and instructing his disciples what to do, this gospel paints a portrait of a savior who acts and wants us *to do* the same.

Rather than say a "portrait" of Jesus, Mark's gospel is more like an action film with annoying repetition of the word "immediate" as he and his disciples race across the holy land

touching everyone in their path and leaving a wake of goodness.

Our reading for today picks up right after the disciples return from their two-by-two expeditions out in the villages.

As Jesus instructed, his skeptical followers went off two-by-two to heal, anoint, and cast out demons. Imagine a collective buzz – a euphoria – as each bursts with excitement to tell of their particular encounter with another human. They felt God’s presence as miracles unfolded by what they did.

It’s one thing to witness a miracle, it’s another thing entirely to be an agent for another person to become whole. Each miracle changes each disciple as well.

Dear God

As we come before your Holy word, settle us into this ancient text. Silence the noise. Send your holy spirit to move through us that we feel alive with your son’s presence and his words seep into the fiber of our being. And may we do more of what pleases you. Amen.

Mark 6:30-43

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

³¹He 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. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As Jesus 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.

³⁵When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.”

³⁷But Jesus answered them, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?”

³⁸And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.”

When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.”

³⁹Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

⁴¹*Taking* the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and *blessed* and *broke* the loaves, and *gave* them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.

⁴²And all ate and were filled; ⁴³and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Despite Jesus and his disciples’ attempt to slip away to a deserted place, when sighted, like paparazzi, the people *run* from all the towns. It’s obvious the “system” of Herod Antipas, Caesar, and the religious establishment have failed these

people if Jesus' simple acts of kindness compel such mob-like behavior.

To Jesus, these people are like "sheep without a shepherd." The Bible often compares good leaders to shepherds.

To be a shepherd demands physical intimacy with gritty tasks. A shepherd pulls them up out of ditches. A shepherd steers them to green pastures. When mites get in their ears, a shepherd anoints their head with oil to keep them from grinding their scalps raw. Without a shepherd, sheep become vulnerable to every carnivore and will simply wither from neglect and harsh weather.

The way Jesus sees it, no one does anything to safeguard these people from the predatory world. Jesus sees these people and has *compassion* for them.

Our translation of "compassion" waters down the original Greek word. It's not some passing sensation. This word means "to be moved in one's bowels." Imagine the sensation so powerful it pulls you into the fray. Compassion is more verb-like and implies doing something for another in need. It's the opposite of "I hate your guts." It means "I feel love for you in my deepest guts."

You stand at a distance with pity. Compassion compels you to act.

The late priest and scholar Henri Nouwen writes:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish.

Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears.

Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

Jesus performs the feeding miracles precisely because he takes basic human need so seriously.

When his disciples look at the crowd, they see only their own insufficiency. Their own scant resources. The impossibility. Jesus, as God, sees genuine need and feels kicked squarely in the gut. He teaches the disciples by doing with their own hands what they think impossible.

Despite the differences in the gospels, they all tell this story in remarkably the same way. Jesus takes the bread given by God. It starts with God's gifts to us, which calls for the blessing of thanks. Jesus breaks the bread, creating enough for everyone. He gives it to disciples, so they meet each person, face to face. Everyone becomes part of this miracle.

Take. Bless. Break. And Jesus gives it to his disciples to share.

Jesus repeats the same miracle later in Mark. On the other side of the Sea of Galilee in Gentile territory, he sees people and feels that unmistakable and undeniable sense of compassion. Hungry people are hungry people.

He does the same thing. Takes bread. Blesses it. Breaks it. And he gives it to his disciples to share. They learn all over again his gut-wrenching love for people by what they do.

Jesus' miracles are not interruptions. They're focal moments in which Jesus shows us who we are meant to be: physically healthy, well fed, of right mind, and in right relationship with each other. Miracles are God's way of making right what has gone wrong.

On the night of the Last Supper, gathered with his disciples; Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives of himself. And he tells them *to do* this in remembrance of him. And he catches us in this miracle of grace.

Today, at his table we will join the multitudes across the world to take, bless, break, and give to one another, putting into our muscle memory to act of doing across the human family.

And we continue to do what he commands.

In this building we assemble *Quickits* to tend to those who live on the margins. We fill *Food to Go* bags for kids who no longer have access to a meal during school's summer recess. We will dance again in February to *Rise Against Hunger* and mix bags to feed over 40,000 hungry souls. We cook dinners in our kitchen for *Street Moms*. We bake cupcakes. The starkness of hunger continues.

As you listen to this, you may think "I don't do any of those things." If compassion moves in your gut to another form of ministry, do it. I hope compassion moves you. The more we engage at a level of fundamental human needs, the distance between strangers shrinks and we both come alive.

Giving support to harassed people, feeding hungry people, and healing sick people has consequences. Those actions alter economies in households and neighborhoods. They transform relationships. They urge people to reconsider old allegiances. They give people hope.

Every aspect of our ministry, meaning the work of our people, in its current form relies upon the power brought into this building.

Thank you to the 80 or so households who have given so very generously to our *Let There Be Light Project*. You see how the light and power in this this building literally keeps us going. Last week, we mailed 650 postcards to members and active participants in this congregation who have not yet given.

This my personal ask. Consider what you may contribute. Your gift, no matter the size, joined with all the others, ensures our ministry continues.

Your gift keeps the light on at the steeple for some weary soul passing, offering hope. Your gift keeps the smartboards going in Sunday School, the zooms alive for the hybrid Men's group, livestream worship to reach beyond the walls, and a safe

haven for grief groups, support groups and all the other community groups.

Even though your passion for ministry may differ from the person sitting next to you, this is the single most unifying project. The electricity sustains every facet of our ministry.

We return to where we started at the beginning of this sermon. When we read the narrative of the Bible from beginning to end, God's character, never remains frozen and static.

God continually reveals new aspects of God's self by moving consistently in the direction of widening the sphere of mercy. This includes us in doing the work of his son.

Doing what Jesus calls us *to do* never demystifies the miracles which unfold. But the experience removes any skepticism that we can be the agents for healing.



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