“GO AND SEE”

Mark 6:30–44

Key Verse: 6:38

“ ‘How many loaves do you have?’ he asked. ‘Go and see.’ When they found out, they said, ‘Five—and two fish.’”

 Today’s world is so cool in many ways. We’ve got Wi-Fi, smart phones, and social media that give instant access to information and that empower ordinary people. But underneath, the world is still a tough place. People with wealth and privilege enjoy themselves in overindulgence, while disadvantaged people, frankly, are treated like animals, and seen only in terms of economic pros and cons. Everybody is scrambling to do things to make their lives a little better. People who purport to be leaders are really living only for their own honor and glory. And nobody has a solution or action plan to make a significant difference. Generally, our society sees Christianity as socially regressive and oppressive. But that version of Christianity doesn’t represent the real Jesus. The real Jesus lived in a world that was probably much tougher than ours. And when nobody at his time knew what to do, Jesus had a vision and a plan. He had a vision of the kingdom of God. And he had a plan to raise his disciples to “*be* the change.” Outwardly it didn’t seem impressive. He was just a carpenter from a backwater town called Nazareth. After he began his public ministry he was always with crowds of the poor and the sick. And he had around him a group of really ordinary men full of weaknesses. But the very power of God was at work in him and in his ministry (1:7; 5:30; 6:14). To human eyes it may have seemed small and weak, but it was a power that would shake the world and change it forever.

Today’s passage is a high point in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus has been proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, healing the sick and training disciples. Now he feeds a crowd of 5,000 men with just five loaves and two fish. To many of us, it’s such a familiar story that we may think we have nothing more to learn. But it teaches some things may take an entire lifetime to really master. As we seek to minister to college students, we want to think today about some important questions this passage leads us to ask. What does it mean to have compassion, and why is that so important? What does it mean to see people as sheep without a shepherd, and what should we do in light of it? What does Jesus’ challenge, “You give them something to eat” really mean to us? And what does it mean to us in our lives, to “Go and see”? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

 At the beginning of chapter 6 Jesus is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth. It’s because those people who were so familiar with his human background couldn’t get past seeing him from a human point of view. His hometown people’s spiritual blindness hindered what God could have done (1–6a). Despite their rejection Jesus refused to be discouraged—he went around from village to village teaching people the word of God (6b). He saw that the need for spiritual laborers was so urgent that he called the Twelve and sent them out two by two, giving them authority over impure spirits (7). He was training them to depend only on God, and, to give people the clear message of the gospel (8–11). Though they were spiritually young in many ways, God used them when they simply followed Jesus’ instructions (12–13). Jesus’ ministry through them reached even the ears of King Herod. Jesus’ ministry was exciting, but Herod was haunted by it, because of his guilt after beheading John the Baptist (14–16). The beheading of John the Baptist revealed how corrupt the times were, that such a righteous man could be eliminated simply because he’d told people to repent. As king of his people Herod should have been a shepherd for them. But when he was consumed by his own sins of lust and pride, he was incapable of caring for anybody other than himself. With such a man as leader, it was really a dark time. But again Jesus was not discouraged. He intensified his training of his disciples to help them grow as true shepherds for their people.

 Look at verse 30. The disciples are called “apostles.” It was because they’d been sent out on a mission from Jesus. Here, they gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. They had preached that people should repent (12). They also had driven out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them (13). They must have been excited to tell Jesus all about their experiences. They must have been amazed that *they* could actually do the same things *Jesus* did. Look at verse 31. This is the second time in Mark’s Gospel we’re told that the disciples were not even able to eat because so many people were coming and going (cf. 3:20). Jesus was so busy with needy people that his disciples had no choice but to skip meals along with him. But after they’d just returned from their mission journey, this time Jesus was concerned for his disciples. Unusually, he had a plan to take them with him and get some rest. Look at verse 32. The disciples must have been so happy to be getting away from the demanding crowds of people. They were sailing on the Sea of Galilee to a remote place, and it was just them and Jesus.

 But it was not meant to be. Look at verse 33. These people ran on foot to reach the place where Jesus’ boat was heading, and they got there ahead of him and his disciples. What does it tell us? It shows how desperate and spiritually thirsty these people were, that they would even run on foot not to miss even for a moment to be with Jesus. If any of us made plans to get away to rest after a lot of hard work, but people showed up to our private retreat place expecting more help, we likely would be really annoyed or upset. But how did Jesus respond? Read verse 34. We notice some things here that we can learn from.

**First**, Jesus had compassion on them. When he landed and saw this large crowd of people already there waiting for him in this remote place, their problems must have seemed endless, and these people must have seemed so self-centered, oblivious to what he was trying to do for his disciples. But Jesus didn’t see this crowd of people like that. His gut reaction, even when they interrupted his plans, was to see them with compassion. In Greek the word for “compassion” means to be deeply moved. It’s closer to our word “empathy,” which means to be able to feel what others are feeling. It’s the exact opposite of indifference. Compassion is actually at the heart of God. The Bible says that our God is the God of great compassion (2Co1:3; cf. Ex34:6; Ps51:1; 86:15; Joel2:3; Jon4:2). Jesus’ compassion here was so beyond mere human compassion that it tells us he was more than a man; he was God Incarnate. And he wasn’t being compassionate for it’s own sake; he was showing his disciples an example of how he wanted them to live. One of the key things disciples of Jesus need to be learning is how to be compassionate towards people.

 Today many people work in the service sector—medicine, law, education, hospitality, retail, food and beverage. But people’s endless needs can wear out service workers until they can’t feel anything anymore and just go through the motions of their job. Compassion is essential if we’re going to excel in any kind of human service. It’s even truer in ministry. Without compassion how can we really minister to people? And yet so often we make ministry about getting people to participate in our programs without actually caring about them. It’s sort of easy to see people’s weaknesses, but much harder to see them with compassion. In UBF we minister to college students. But some people see only negative things in students, such as immaturity, selfishness, immorality, laziness or lack of commitment, and condemn them in their hearts. Of course such people never even get started ministering to students. Some of us have tried to minister to students, but when they leave us, we feel like we’ve failed or only been used, and we have no heart to reach out to new students again. How can we be renewed in the compassion of Jesus? Philippians 2:1 helps. It reads, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion.” To have Christ’s compassion we need to be united or “reunited” with Christ. We need to come back to him, open our hearts and let him minister to us. We need to experience how much he loves us and allow his love to comfort us. When we really turn to Christ, he gives us the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit he reminds us of his great tenderness with sick, sinful and needy people. He also renews his grace of forgiveness in our hearts, and helps us forgive one another. If we have no compassion or have lost our compassion, we need to stop whatever we’re doing and spend enough time until we really can be reunited with Jesus. We need to learn Christ’s compassion until it’s at the core of who we are, until our gut response to people, even when we’re stretched beyond our limits, is with the compassion of Jesus.

**Second**, “like sheep without a shepherd.” Read verse 34 again. The Bible often depicts God as a Shepherd and his people as his sheep (e.g. Ge48:15; Ps28:9; 80:1). The most famous Psalm in the Bible, Psalm 23, begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.” Isaiah describes the Lord: “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Isa40:11). The Bible also describes Israel’s greatest king, David, as a shepherd of God’s people (2Sa5:2). Some may think the imagery of sheep and shepherds is beautiful and poetic. To others, it hurts our pride to be referred to as sheep. Sheep are not so intelligent. They need constant guidance and care.

This expression “sheep without a shepherd” was originally from the words of Moses’ prayer to God just before he died. Moses prayed that God would appoint someone to lead his people Israel so that the Lord’s people would not be like “sheep without a shepherd” (Nu27:15–17). Many years later the prophet Micaiah also described the people of Israel under King Ahab as “sheep without a shepherd,” and so they were scattering (1Ki22:17). It’s common knowledge that little children need good parents or caregivers to thrive and become strong and healthy. Elementary school teachers can tell right away: Children who live with adults who are good shepherds are happy, healthy and strong, but children who live with adults who are not good shepherds are dramatically weaker, and kind of lost. This is true not only for children but for every phase in human development. Teenagers need good shepherds who can mentor and guide them. College students, singles, young couples, and even senior citizens need good shepherds. Whether we accept it or not, we all need a good shepherd, someone who actually cares about us, understands us, protects us and can help us reach our full potential.

Jesus had compassion for these people because he could see their entire lives. He wasn’t narrow-minded, only looking at their immediate rudeness. He saw that the root of all their problems was that they’d been living like sheep without a shepherd. What does the image of “sheep without a shepherd” mean? Another Gospel adds that they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” To be like sheep without a shepherd was to be afraid, exposed and vulnerable. Basically, it meant to be wandering, hungry, thirsty, and really, lost. Jesus saw the root of all people’s problems: they lacked a shepherd. Each human being is created in the image of God, with great potential (Ge1:26,27). If only a person could meet a good shepherd, he or she could grow to become an amazing person God could use. In light of this, as we pray for college students and people in our community, may God move our hearts to see them the way Jesus saw the crowds in his day, not with indifference, not with judgment, not with annoyance, but as precious sheep without a shepherd.

**Third**, “he began teaching them many things.” Read verse 34 again. With compassion Jesus didn’t start with the people’s immediate or surface problems, such as hunger or illness; he started with teaching. We wonder what it was Jesus was teaching them? It doesn’t say. But we can be sure Jesus wasn’t just giving them good advice, like time management or better life skills. He was teaching them the word of God, just like a farmer sows seed (4:14). He believed that if they heard God’s word, it would speak to their deepest needs. He believed God’s word is like food for the soul, and he was giving them this spiritual food (Mt4:4). At first, it doesn’t seem like compassion to start teaching people the Bible. But from Jesus’ example we can see that it is. We may not think we have the gift of teaching. But it’s really not hard to share the word of God with most people. All we’ve got to do is get them to start reading it. If we just trust that the words of the Bible still speak to people, we can help them read it and think about it and trust that God himself will start revealing himself to them.

 By now we might be wondering how the disciples felt about what Jesus was doing. We can just imagine how disappointed they were that Jesus turned his attention away from them and started teaching the crowds yet again. We can just imagine how upset they were that their time of restful retreat with Jesus was again interrupted by needy people. But out of their deep respect for Jesus, they controlled themselves and didn’t say anything. Very late in the day, when their strength ran out, they finally had to speak up. Read verses 35,36. We notice that all these people didn’t mind staying there with Jesus, missing meals, just to hear him teach the word of God. It was probably going on for several hours.

In their suggestion the disciples sound like they were trying to be helpful. It sounds like really good management to help these people find some place to get something to eat. But how did Jesus respond? Read verse 37a. Jesus was really challenging them. Of course he knew his disciples had no means to feed this huge crowd of 5,000 men. But he was challenging them to feel responsible. In the same way, Jesus knows that we have no means by ourselves to do anything for the thousands of college students and young people in this community with all their spiritual needs. But today Jesus is challenging us to feel spiritually responsible for them.

How did the disciples respond in turn? Read verse 37b. They balked at Jesus’ idea. They thought it was ridiculous to expect them to feed this crowd. And they even thought it was a bad idea to spend that much money on them! Usually the disciples considered very seriously whatever Jesus said, but this time, they thought he was being too much. He was pushing them to go beyond their human limitations to do something for this needy crowd.

When they shot down what he said, how did Jesus respond? Let’s read verse 38. This seems to be the whole crux of the matter. Instead of thinking about what they didn’t have and about what they couldn’t do, Jesus helped them to start thinking about what they did have and what they could do. Like a great encourager, Jesus wanted them to be positive. Jesus wanted them, even when they didn’t feel like it, to learn to love and serve people and do something for them. Jesus was training them to learn his compassion, his heart. So he graciously and patiently told them, “Go and see.” His words “Go and see” were also an encouragement to have faith, faith in God. Faith in God doesn’t have to be spectacular. Jesus said that all we need is faith as small as a mustard seed (Mt17:20; Lk17:6; cf. Mk4:30,31). In this situation, when it seemed impossible to do anything and the demand was so great, all the disciples needed was a mustard seed of faith to go and see what they did have. And what did they have? It says they had five loaves and two fish. Of course it was silly to think that with such a pittance they could feed a crowd of 5,000 hungry men. But if they brought it to Jesus by faith, God could multiply it and do a miracle.

This is the other key element disciples of Jesus need to keep learning: faith in God. Ministry always looks challenging. Our personal situation will always have limitations that seem to make it impossible for us to do anything. And often when we look at ourselves, we can seem so weak and inadequate. But Jesus wants us to go and see what we do have to serve him. He wants us to find some specific things we can bring to him to use us for his work of restoring people to God. What do we have? What could we offer him? It may be a certain talent. It may be time. It may be health or a specific living situation that allows us to participate in ministry. At first, we may be like the disciples, totally unwilling. But today Jesus is speaking to us just as graciously as he spoke to them: “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” It’s not just an organization like UBF that is asking us; it’s Jesus himself asking us to go and see what we have to offer to him to bring his love and his grace to the needy people of the world, the needy people in our lives, the college students who are like sheep without a shepherd.

What happened when the disciples did what Jesus said? Look at verses 39–44. Jesus performed a miracle. He got the people ready to receive what he was going to give them. Then he looked up to heaven and gave thanks for the five loaves and two fish. To human eyes, it looked almost laughable. But this small amount that the disciples brought to him with a mustard seed of faith was so precious to God. In Jesus’ hands, the bread and fish multiplied until everyone ate. And they didn’t just get a small bite—they ate bread and fish until they were satisfied. It tells us that Jesus is able to do immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine (Eph3:20). We also see here that the disciples even picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. It means there was just enough for each of them, after they put their own needs aside and worked with Jesus to minister to the people. It tells us that when we join with Jesus, with compassion and faith, to minister to people who are like sheep without a shepherd, God himself will graciously provide exactly what we need.

I’ve been involved in full time college student ministry in UBF for the past 32 years. I spent basically my life for it. Over the years I’ve had my heart broken several times. And at this stage in life I’ve begun to feel like I’ve done enough. Honestly, my heart has become rather dead. But through this passage God has been calling me to repent. I realized I need to be reunited with Jesus, learn his compassion freshly, and learn to see people the way he does, as sheep without a shepherd. And I need to go and see what I have to give him to serve these precious young people. Please pray for me.

Today we thought about Jesus’ compassion, about how he saw people, and what he did for them. And we thought about how he helped his disciples to grow as practical shepherds for the needy crowds, especially through his words, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” The work of helping people to grow in Christ like this may seem trivial. But to Jesus it’s the hope of God in a dark world. May God newly inspire us to join with Christ in our generation to raise a new generation of young people who can learn Jesus’ compassion and Jesus’ faith in God to serve the world.