

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

DESERTED PLACES

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Ron Starenko

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 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...

53When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56And 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Deserted Places—Avoiding Them to Our Own Peril

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Lonely/Alone*

Off hand, one of the scariest places I can think of, for any of us, would be getting stuck on a lonely road somewhere with a flat tire, without a spare, without a flashlight, and, God forbid, without a cell phone, deserted! From the time that we are born we have a desperate need to be attached, connected to our mothers, dreading that we could be deserted, left alone. On the flip side, we also have a need to be alone, that is, to come to terms with the reality that we are individuals, separate from everyone else with an identity all our own, an even scarier journey, one that we might also want to avoid.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Desperate to Fill the Void*

Avoiding, however, always leaves a void that we cannot tolerate. The temptation, driven by fear, is always there, how we seek to overcome our separateness, our loneliness, by merging, drawn, for example, to the world of sports, the theater, the local watering holes, the latest fads, where crowds rush about (v. 55), how modern people like us seek either to find ourselves or escape ourselves, which are two sides to the same problem, living either way in a deserted place.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Lost in Our Wilderness/Emptiness*

To describe this problem Jesus uses the metaphor of sheep having no shepherd, like a boat or a plane without a pilot, or being up a creek without a paddle—a dismal fate in any case. As we rush after our idols in order to escape our fate we succeed only in burying ourselves deeper into our emptiness, as none can fill us, (actually can only let us down), the just fate of those who are without God, without a Creator, a Companion, a Comforter, stuck in a deserted place forever, sometimes referred to as hell.

PROGNOSIS: Deserted Places—Joining Them as a Sign of Our Well-Being

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Goes There*

Jesus was no stranger to deserted places. He began his ministry in the wilderness, tempted by the devil to seek power, safety, and comfort above everything, who told him that he deserved it, had a right to grasp for it (the original temptation in the garden), promised him that he then would have clear sailing in life, pain free, applause filled, kingdoms everywhere. No more desert stuff! No cross! A deal!? No deal!, he tells Satan. God's deal is what mattered. And Jesus went through it: the pain, the suffering, the loneliness, being deserted by family, friends, finally by his heavenly Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?", he screamed. In that cry of abandonment a divine transaction occurs, as Jesus suffers away the divine desertion we deserve; while we desert God for idols, Jesus offers to us what we could never deserve, a place of eternal well-being, a good standing with God, a new land "flowing with milk and honey," a place in the Son (pardon the pun). As Jesus rises from death and hell to be forever present with us, the deserted now receive what belongs to the deserving.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Touched by His Presence*

Now we know what compassion is, what it does. While, indeed, Jesus has already suffered for us, once and for all, he still suffers with us (Heb. 2:14a and 7:27b), identifying with our pain and sorrow, however deserted or displaced we might be in this world, drawing us out of isolation and desolation into the fellowship of his body, where he lays his hands upon us in our baptism and feeds us at the communion table, where he enters our deserted places with his healing presence, as we get to touch his cloak, as it were, knowing that we have come home, found a life, now in fellowship with God forever.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Entering the Places of the Deserted*

And so, we become free to seek him, to find him where he is—beyond this place, sent out, as we are, to deserted places, to gather those who have no shepherd, who are alone and empty, who have no one to love them back into God's embrace, to go where Jesus went and still goes, to the crowds, the villages, the cities, the farms, the marketplaces, to those today searching for meaning and hope, healing and well-being, the needs we all have in body, mind, and spirit.