

Shepherds for Sheep  
Mark 6:30-44

How appropriate it is for us to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on this day when we are ordaining and installing new leaders for the Church. Deacons are, after all, most clearly the servants of the church – the word deacon means servant after all. But it is today when the elders are most publicly involved in similar service, distributing the bread and wine. Elders and deacons thus all share in the same sort of servant ministry to which Jesus called His disciples in this passage.

Now, to be sure, Jesus' disciples had been given much more responsibility than just serving meals. Jesus had sent them out two by two to preach and to cast out demons, and to heal the sick. And at the beginning of today's passage, they had come back from their short-term missions trip, heady with success, and so anxious to tell Jesus all that they done and all that they had taught.

Yes, leadership brings with it great honor and it's easy to let titles go to your head. Jesus knew this, and so He took the opportunity presented in today's passage to take His disciples down a notch or two. For in these verses, Jesus made their limitations just as clear to them as their strengths had been. In other words, He taught them a basic lesson in humility, and this is a lesson that modern leaders need to learn just as badly.

Why should Christian leaders be humble? In the first place because our resources are limited. The disciples had just returned from an intensive ministry experience. Yes, they had experienced great success, but now they were worn out. And yet there was no rest for the weary: verse 31 says that the demands of ministry were so great, they didn't even have time to eat. These guys may have been mightily used of God, but they were also mighty close to burnout.

You know, it's easy and it's tempting for leaders to imagine that we are indispensable. It's easy for us to imagine that the fact that we have been chosen to do a job means that we are the only ones who can do it. But we Presbyterians know better – that's why we have sessions of elders to lead a church, rather than relying on one priest. That's why we have a whole presbytery full of elders rather than relying on one bishop. That's why we have a board of deacons to divide up all the work of a congregation that needs to be done. There's no reason for any one person to shoulder the whole burden – and that's largely because there's no way any one person can do the job of leadership.

But the disciples weren't just limited by their energy level. Jesus went a step further, asking them to do that which was completely beyond their ability. There was no way that any of

them, or even all of them in cooperation could have fed that huge crowd. Jesus taught them humility by asking them to do the impossible.

What about us? Even today, the job of leading a church isn't just difficult because of the number of problems that the people face. Much of the job is quite frankly impossible for any human being to do. Jesus told us to make disciples of all the nations, but we can't make anyone follow Jesus. There's no way that any of us can save souls. We can't kindle a fire of faith inside someone else. We can't produce the fruit of hope or love inside someone else's heart. We can't even bring someone to an intellectual understanding of the things of God on our own.

No, none of these things are possible without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. In a very real sense, then, the mission of the Church and its leaders is really the mission of God – He just lets us help Him out in accomplishing it. And Jesus made this point obvious to His disciples as they waited on tables while He provided the people's needs. He thus demonstrated that the essence of Christian leadership is humble service.

But if the hallmark of a Christian leader is humility, it is also fidelity. A deacon is called to be a trustworthy steward of the people's tithes and offerings. But an elder is called to a greater life of trust, and not just because of his personal inability to perform the task of evangelism that is set before him. An elder must trust Christ to accomplish Christ's work in the hearts of Christ's people, regardless of whether the elder knows what is going on or not. For if an elder must be conscious of his weakness, he must be equally conscious of his ignorance.

Think about it. When Jesus told the disciples to have everyone sit down on the grass, He didn't tell them what was about to happen. For all they knew, He was going to have them explain to everyone that there wouldn't be anything for them to eat that day, and leave them to field the questions from the angry or confused mob.

No, they didn't know what was going to happen. But they knew Who was in charge. Their trust was in Christ alone, and so they did His bidding, even if it made no sense to them, even if having everyone sit down seemed to do nothing toward bringing a solution to the urgent problem at hand.

No, the disciples simply did as they were told. And then they simply handed out the bread and fish that Jesus gave them. They didn't try to improvise or get creative. They didn't urge the people to have a grass salad while they waited. They trusted Christ to give them what they needed to give to the people. And their trust was not disappointed.

Elders, if we are called today to the same sort of humility, we are also called to the same sort of trust. It's not our responsibility to make up answers to the people's problems. It's not our

job to blaze new trails of creative theology. It's those sorts of efforts that have gotten our denomination into the mess it's in today.

No, we are called simply to distribute what Christ has given to us, to hand on to the next generation the faith which was once delivered unto the saints, to share our Christian experience and our knowledge of the Bible with those who, like us, are confronting temptations and trials every day. We are called back time and time again to the presence of Christ, who alone has the power to meet the deepest needs of the people we are called to serve. We are called to depend on Him as the people depend on us. We are called not to be served, but to serve.

But what about those we are called to serve? When Jesus saw them, he was moved with compassion for them, for they were like sheep without shepherds. And so even though He was just as tired and hungry as the disciples were, He began to teach them many things.

Sheep without shepherds – if that was true of the people of Jesus' day, how much more truly does it describe modern Americans? For even though we imagine ourselves to be self-sufficient, rugged individualists, for the most part we don't know any more about Jesus or about living the Christian life than the people that listened to Jesus in that grassy meadow 2000 years ago.

Yes, we modern American Christians may think we can do just fine with our own Bibles and our own prayer closets and our own ideas about what's right and wrong. But because sin so easily deceives and ensnares us, because it's so easy for us to rationalize what we want to do, the truth is that we are sheep who need shepherds.

That means we need elders, not to lord it over us, but to lead us through examples of selfless service. We need elders, not to tell us what to do, but to tell us what Christ has said He wants us to do. Just as elders need each other to hold us accountable and keep us on the straight and narrow, so the Church needs elders, chosen by the people because of their wise words and deeds, to do what the disciples did at that boat landing so many years ago – to hand out what Jesus has given us: the Word of truth, the Bread of Life.

So, elders, feed the sheep. Give yourselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. Don't just serve the people the sacrament today, but serve them the Bread of Life every day as you speak the words of Christ to them and as you live the life of Christ before them.

People of God, you have chosen these elders and deacons to lead you in the way of Christ. So follow them as they follow the One Who offered Himself up for all His people once for all, shedding His blood that our blood need not be shed. Christ invites all His people to this table

– some to serve, but all to receive the forgiveness, the cleansing, the nourishment that only He can provide. Come and be filled.

Hymn 220 (all) Break Thou the Bread of Life