

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 install deacons and elders. For it is during this sacrament that elders are most publicly involved in the life and work of the congregation. As they pass the trays of communion elements among the faithful, they demonstrate in an unmistakable way the same thing that deacons show us day in and day out: the essence of Christian leadership is service.

And we see the same truth so clearly in today's passage, don't we? For Jesus' disciples were also called to be leaders in the church. They had been given lots of responsibility, as earlier in the same chapter they had been sent 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 mission trip, heady with success, anxious to report to Jesus all the things they had 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 is just as valuable for all of us modern leaders.

But why is it so important that Christian leaders should be humble? In the first place, because our resources are limited. Remember, the disciples had just returned from an intensive season of ministry. Yes, they had experienced great success, but their efforts had exhausted them. And yet there was no rest for the weary: verse 31 says that the crowds' demands on them were so great that 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.

Just so, 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 a whole board of deacons to organize and mobilize the congregation for service. That's why we have sessions of elders to lead a church, rather than relying on one minister or priest. That's why we have a whole presbytery full of teaching and ruling elders rather than relying on one bishop. There's just no reason for any one of our deacons or elders to shoulder the whole burden by themselves – and that's largely because there's no way any one person can do the job of Christian leadership.

But the disciples weren't just limited by their energy level. No, Jesus went a step further, asking them to do something completely beyond their ability. For there was no way that any of them, or even all of them working together could have fed that huge crowd. And so we see that Jesus taught the disciples humility by asking them to do the impossible.

Okay, so 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. No, the truth is that much of the job is quite frankly impossible for any human being to do. After all, Jesus told us to make disciples of all the nations, but we can't make anyone follow Jesus. We can't save anyone else's soul. 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, empowering work of the Holy Spirit in us and in others. And so, in a very real sense, the mission of the Church and its leaders is nothing more and nothing less than 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 merely waited on tables while He was the One Who provided the people's needs. Jesus 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. For elders and deacons are called to a life of radical trust, and not just because of our inability to perform the tasks set before us. No, we must trust Christ to accomplish Christ's work in the hearts of Christ's people, regardless of whether we deacons or elders know what is going on or not. For if deacons and elders must be conscious of our weakness, we must be equally conscious of our ignorance.

For think about it. When Jesus told His 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, the disciples 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 be pointless in the face of the urgent problem at hand.

And yet, the disciples did as they were told. They told everyone to sit down. And then they continued to follow Jesus' lead, simply handing out the bread and fish that He 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 simply trusted Christ to give them what they needed to give to the people. And their trust was not disappointed.

Elders and deacons, if we are called today to the same kind of humility, we are also called to the same kind of trust. For 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 too many denominations into the mess they are 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, on

the whole 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.

Is that really true? Well, even though in John 14:6 Jesus clearly says that "No one comes to the Father but through Me," a recent poll from Probe Ministries tells us that 70% of those who claim to be born-again Christians insist that Jesus is not the only way to God. This is what people say who insist that have made a personal commitment to Christ – and they make up only a third of all those who call themselves Christians in America. Yes, the modern Church still has a lot to learn about Jesus. And all of us Christians still need to follow Him more consistently. And that means that we all still need shepherds.

For however much 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, the sad fact is this: because sin so easily deceives and ensnares us, because it's so easy for us to rationalize what we want to do, we need shepherds to lead us and guide us and point out the way to follow Christ in our increasingly confusing, troubling world.

That's why we all need deacons, not to lord it over us, but to lead us through their example 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. And just as deacons and elders need each other to hold us accountable and keep us on the straight and narrow, so the Church needs its leaders, people we elect to office because of their wise and godly 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, deacons, shepherd the sheep. Model a life of selfless service, and encourage other Christians to follow your example. 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 your deacons and elders 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. May we all come and be filled.