

GOD FILLS THE GAPS
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The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
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“[Jesus] said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.” (Mark 6:31-32)

Some of you have heard me talk about how important church camping was in my own formation as a Christian. I attended United Methodist camps on Shelter Island and in upstate New York and Connecticut, one-week-long camps, every summer, beginning the summer before third grade. I was a counselor in the summers after my first two years of college. I loved being a counselor but will always remember the exhaustion associated with closely monitoring the activities of a group of campers during their time with us, just from Sunday afternoon through Saturday morning—especially the little third and fourth graders. Their boundless energy, endless need for attention, tendency to wander off, and steady stream of questions was completely endearing, *and* was enough to make even the most extreme extrovert want to run for cover at times! State law required a half hour of “F.O.B.” – “flat on back” – after lunch, and I was always asleep seconds after hitting the pillow. And once our day off began after lunch on Saturdays, all we counselors wanted to do was sleep.

Being surrounded by needs and a desire for attention is as tiring as anything in human life (all you parents and grandparents know what I’m talking about), and it is exactly the situation of Jesus and the Twelve in our Gospel text today. They do indeed try to get away to a deserted place, but without success – the crowds follow them wherever they go, and the sick who were brought to Jesus for healing in the marketplaces strained from their mats to touch the fringe of his cloak. It’s not hard to picture the scene: there is tremendous excitement, a great swarm of human activity, and no rest for the weary.

However, there is a detail in this vivid text that is very important if we are going to fully unlock its meaning. It is right in the first verse: “The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.” (Mark 6:30) Remarkably, this is the only place in the entire Gospel of Mark in which the word “apostles,” as opposed to “disciples,” is used to describe the Twelve. Mark’s audience would have noticed it. The Twelve have just returned from their first successful mission trip, which we heard about two Sundays ago; they have been out, not as followers or learners (disciples), but as “commissioned representatives” (apostles). (Bock, *Mark*, p. 211) One can sense Jesus’ great pleasure in their success. It is also on the heels of this success that Jesus and the Twelve can’t get away from the needy, swarming crowds, and try (unsuccessfully, it turns out) to get away by themselves.

In calling the Twelve “apostles” here, in this one place, Mark – who like all the Gospel writers chooses his words very carefully – is making a connection between the vocation of representing Jesus as apostles and the tremendous demands that vocation entails. To be a commissioned representative of Jesus means working tirelessly in response to the needs of the world. And notice how Jesus responds when the crowd hurried ahead of the boat and got to the deserted place ahead of him and the Twelve – so the deserted place is now yet another crowded place. Jesus responds with *compassion*. He continues right on, teaching the crowd, without the rest he had hoped to have.

Jesus is showing the Twelve what apostolic service in God’s name is all about. It’s possible to keep going through exhaustion and fatigue because God fills the gap between our own capacity and what we are being asked to do. To carry on the exhausting work of ministry and stay compassionate is

the vocation of the church in every generation. It is our vocation in the new life we are beginning together as one Episcopal family in Ossining. And we are never alone in it.

It's hard work – it's exhausting – but with the presence of God's Spirit we find strength, and blessings, and rewards we could never otherwise have imagined. Think back to those exhausting little third and fourth grade campers. I'll never forget one of them, a little boy named Adam. Every Sunday at drop off, as most campers arrived with their parents in station wagons, a small number of campers arrived by bus, most of them from low-income communities. Adam arrived by bus one week, and, from the moment he stepped off and was introduced to me as his counselor, he stayed at my elbow pretty much all week, thrilled to be surrounded by the beauty of the camp, peppering me with questions and observations. This continued well into each night. One night, lying awake in the bunk way after the rest of the boys were asleep, he was reflecting on the star-filled sky and what lay beyond the end of the universe. "I wonder if that's where God is," he said. It had to have been after midnight, but suddenly I was wide awake. I knew that this was a moment not to be missed. I sat up, and Adam and I spoke in whispers about his many thoughts about outer space, the nature of time, where our spirits go when we die, and other topics. He was seven years old.

God gave me what I needed that night, and throughout the week, and it is not the exhaustion I remember, but the blessing of being a part of a life-changing week for a little boy. God filled the gaps in my capacities. Compassion, caring, attention, interest: these are the gifts God gives us when we encounter those who need us. When Adam climbed onto the bus to leave camp, took his seat, waved, and then put his chin in his hand and looked thoughtfully up at the sky, I knew that I would never look at stars – or at God – in quite the same way again. It is this same God, at once beyond the edge of the universe and living within and among us, who promises to empower us, modern apostles right here in Ossining, loving the community we have been given to serve, representing the Lord who sends us. And this same God promises, as well, to fill the gaps in our own capacities whenever we need it. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.