

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Jer 23:1-6

Ps 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

Eph 2:13-18

Mk 6:30-34

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One of these scenarios has happened to all of us: You keep your Saturday afternoon schedule clear so you can watch a baseball game. You shuffle the children off to their grandparents so you and your husband can have one dinner where no milk is spilled, no food goes airborne, and the conversation involves more than the latest adventures of “Dora the Explorer.” You finally find a free evening to start that book that everyone says is so great, or to watch that movie everyone else is raving about.

And then the phone rings.

It’s not a wrong number or a telemarketer, something you can deal with quickly. It’s not a neighbor with a minor request, who you can promise to call back tomorrow. It’s not someone inviting you to an impromptu barbecue, where you can say “Sorry, I’d love to come, but I’ve got plans,” specifically, “I plan to sit peacefully and watch the ball game.”

If you screen your calls, it’s not the voice or the number of your boss, who you know is calling because he just erased a critical computer file - again - or because she just remembered a project that you absolutely, positively have to finish by the morning, just like the project she remembered last Saturday. These people will suck the lifeforce out of you if you let them, so you just ignore those calls and get on with the business of relaxing.

Instead, it’s the voice of someone in need. The number on the screen belongs to a friend you know is struggling. It’s an adult child seeking advice, a lonely brother or sister who needs someone to talk to, a student you go to school with whose having a hard time at home. And as you stand there and listen, you realize that the ball game is off, the hot meal has become leftovers, the book will gather dust for a few more weeks, and the sequel to your movie will probably be out before you’ve seen part one.

Spoiled plans: they’ve happened to all of us.

What makes it worse is that it always seems to be the same people. They are professionals, people who have made bad-timing a fine art. Every family and office and school and group of friends has a “Spoiler of Plans.” Don’t look around, let’s not name names - we all know who that person is in our life. Relentless as the Terminator, precise as Big Ben, destructive as dynamite, they are the people who have real problems, but always at the worst times; people who are genuinely in need, but never before a staff meeting or a dentist’s appointment or a session of weeding the lawn. Instead, it’s always before a party, always before a quiet Saturday afternoon nap, always before a concert.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus welcomes back the Twelve Apostles. He had sent them out two by two to preach repentance, to drive out demons, and cure the sick, and now they have returned, full of stories of their successes, anxious to tell Jesus all they have done. And Jesus, like any of us would, has missed his friends. He wants to have a reunion with them, a special gathering, just

himself and his closest companions. He says to them, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” Jesus is looking forward to a pleasant evening of eating and laughing and storytelling with his friends.

That’s not what happens. They get in a boat and ride off to find a quiet beach, just for a few hours, just for a simple meal. But their plans are spoiled. “People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.” A huge crowd has replaced a small get-together. And the crowd is not there to cheer Jesus, to take his picture and get his autograph, to sing his praises and maybe snag a souvenir. They are people with problems, people who have risen up out of a valley dark with sin and sickness, loneliness and grief, and come to Christ, in search of a shepherd, in need of a teacher.

How does the Lord respond? Jesus doesn’t talk about his own needs. He doesn’t complain about his lack of “me time.” He expresses no regret, doesn’t sigh with resignation, doesn’t turn to his Apostles and roll his eyes and say, “Looks like we can’t we get a minute to ourselves.” Instead, the Gospel tells us this: “When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” Jesus’ heart is instantly moved with pity. Without pause, he rolls up his sleeves and begins to work for the salvation of the crowd, these sheep without a shepherd, these students without a teacher. It wasn’t what he planned to do. But he does it.

Mark’s Gospel says Jesus “began to teach them many things,” but Mark doesn’t specify what those things were. Did he speak of the need for repentance? Possibly. Did he proclaim the need for forgiveness? Probably. Did he offer a parable about the coming reign of God? Very likely, indeed. But while we don’t know what Jesus taught them, it is certain what Jesus teaches us by his attitude and action. Who among us here will be thrown into prison because he believes in Christ? Probably no one. Who of us will suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ’s name. Probably no one. Who of us will meet the unexpected visitor, the unplanned guest? Everyone! Who of us will pick up the phone or open the door and encounter the dread “Spoiler of Plans”? All of us! And today, Christ says to us quite simply: “That is your moment to shine. Not in a prison cell, not kneeling before an executioner, but confronted by that man or woman who is going to interrupt your schedule, who is going to ruin your plans.”

That is our moment to imitate Christ, who died because our sin spoiled God’s plan for humanity. That is our moment to be the shepherd, to be the teacher, to be Christians not just in our prayers for those who are far off but in our concern and help for those who are near. It may seem like such a small thing, a minor aggravation, not the stuff of stained glass windows and halos, not the heaviest of crosses to bear. But the Lord is clear: he will meet us where we are, and that is where he wants us to respond. If you are a missionary and meet Christ in a foreign land, there you respond to him. If you work in the city and regularly pass a beggar, there you meet Christ and there you respond to him. If you are married, you meet Christ in your spouse and there you respond to him. And if you have plans, and they are spoiled by someone in need, there you meet Christ, and there you respond to him. It is Christ who has sought you out in that person, Christ who appears in the unplanned guest, Christ who reaches out to you in the unexpected visitor.

That is our moment to imitate Christ. That is our moment to shine.