

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mark 6: 30 – 34

An Irish Priest was transferred to a Mission in Texas. He got out of bed one morning and walked to the window of his bedroom to get a deep breath of the beautiful day outside.

He then noticed there was a jackass lying dead in the middle of his front lawn. He promptly called the local police station. The conversation went like this:

"Good morning. This is Sergeant Jones. How might I help you?"

"And the best of the day to yourself. This is Father O'Malley at St. Ann's Catholic Church. There's a jackass lying dead in me front lawn and would ye be so kind as to send a couple o' yer lads to take care of the matter."

Sergeant Jones, considering himself to be quite a wit and recognizing the accent, thought he would have a little fun with the good father, replied, "Well now Father, it was always my impression that you people took care of the last rites!"

There was dead silence on the line for a long moment. Then, Father O'Malley replied, "Aye, 'tis certainly true; but we are also obliged to notify the next of kin first, which is the reason for me call."

Today's gospel affirms something we know to be true about Jesus. He had **compassion** for those in need. When he disembarks from boat in today's gospel, he sees a huge crowd.

The text tells us that his heart was moved with pity because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then, he begins to teach them. Jesus sees their spiritual hunger and he instructs them.

In the very next passage of Mark's gospel, Jesus learns that the same crowd has no food. He then feeds them by multiplying the loaves and fishes.

So, Jesus teaches those who are **spiritually** hungry and feeds those who are **physically** hungry. He does both because he has **compassion** on those he encounters.

Now, we always try to follow Jesus' example, and there is nothing more Christian than helping those in need. But helping those in need is not as simple as it might first seem.

In the real world we must always decide whether giving people what they want or what they need will help them or will hurt them.

When we encounter someone who is poor, unemployed, uneducated, or wounded, we must decide whether our generosity to them will improve their life or make them dependent on further generosity from us or from others.

Whether our generosity is personal or comes through governmental programs that address social ills, we must always decide whether the giving or the grant will lift the people from their need or relegate them to a life of dependency.

We cannot avoid making that choice. Here is where the example of Jesus is so important. Before Jesus decides whether he is going to give or not, before he decides whether he is going to help or not, he first has **compassion** on those who are in need.

We must do the same. Let me be clear, having **compassion** for those in need does not necessarily mean we will help them.

Sometimes our help is only an enablement of a problem. But unless we begin with **compassion**, we will not recognize that we have a choice to help or not.

We must begin with **compassion** rather than judgment, because when we begin with judgment we absolve ourselves from deciding whether it is proper to intervene or not.

Imagine what would have happened in the gospel if Jesus began with judgment. If he stepped off the boat and said, “Look at all these spiritually dead people. Why don’t they take responsibility for their lives?”

Why don’t they spend more time in the temple or studying God’s law? Look at these foolish people coming out to a deserted place without food. How do they expect to eat if they do not even have the sense to carry a lunch with them?”

Jesus could have begun with judgment, but he began with **compassion**. We must do the same. But, how do we do that?

How do we make our first step one of **compassion**? There is a saying that has been around in the Christian tradition for a long time. It is not in the bible, but all of you have heard it.

It is used when we face someone in need. And it says, “There but for the grace of God go I.” If we could approach every person in need with that saying in mind, we would always be people of **compassion**.

We would be people who realize that our lives could be different. What if we had different parents? What if we were born in another country? What if we were not as talented? What if we had genetic or health issues?

We could easily find ourselves among the poor, the unemployed, the uneducated, and the wounded. When we understand that any person in need could be us, we would approach that person with **compassion**.

Again, let me emphasize that approaching people with **compassion** does not necessarily determine that we will help them.

It is, however, the necessary foundation on which any decision to help must be made. If we are to follow Jesus' example, we begin with **compassion**.

And, **compassion** begins when we realize that: there but for the grace of God go I.

AMEN.