How Do You Spell Relief?
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
July 19, 2015
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Hot Springs, Arkansas
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I. I would imagine that most of you remember this commercial.
   A. It shows a person who is obviously in digestive distress
      and asks the question, “How do you spell relief?” In an effort to
      bring the name of their product into our minds whenever we have
      “heartburn,” the makers of this particular antacid found an
      interesting way to make us think of (and hopefully purchase) their
      product. And, I believe, the TV ad worked very well, because I
      would venture to say that most of us think of and spell out the
      name of this particular antacid whenever we hear someone say,
      “How do you spell relief?” We most likely respond (either verbally
      or in our mind) “R*O*L*A*I*D*S.” The makers of Rolaids want us
      to think, feel, and believe that their antacid will give us relief. The
      idea is to make sure that we don’t think about Tums or Pepto-
      Bismol or any other stomach antacids that are supposed to give
      us relief from indigestion.
   
   B. That is all well and good in the world of “upset stomachs,”
      but what about our real life? In the day-to-day grind of life - when
      we may be feeling overwhelmed by the myriad of things that “grab
at us” - how then, do we spell relief? What is it that gives us relief from the normal strain of each day?

C. For Jesus and the disciples - who had been going at it for weeks without any significant time off - they were spelling relief this way - R*E*S*T. Our gospel reading for today says, “(Jesus) said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for awhile.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (Mark 6:31).

D. We are talking about some very busy folks here - my friends. I wonder - have you ever been so busy that you haven’t even had time to eat? There wasn’t even time for the disciples to stop and have a satisfying meal. I guess we didn’t really invent “fast-food.” It sounds like the disciples and Jesus had to catch a bite “on the run” - because they didn’t have time to just stop and eat.

E. They were hoping to spell relief R*E*S*T, but it just couldn’t happen! The same kind of thing happens to us in our hectic world, and many humans spell relief during those kinds of times with words like this: D*RU*G*S or A*L*C*O*H*O*L or even (as crazy as it sounds) M*O*R*E W*O*R*K! Jesus gives us an example in today’s reading to spell relief in a way that is motivated by God’s love. As persons who claim the title of Christians (Christ Followers) - persons who confess a belief in Christ and Christ’s teachings - we would be well served to spell relief - J*E*S*U*S! Or as we think about the times we have great burdens and pressures upon us we might spell relief P*R*A*Y*R. Prayer
gives us the ability to communicate with - to have a close relationship with - the One whom God calls the Son of God - that is Jesus Christ our Lord!

F. And, if we were to look at the gospel reading for today and come up with one word that spelled relief for the crowd that Jesus and the disciples encountered - that word would be spelled C*O*M*P*A*S*S*I*O*N. The most important sentence (I believe) in today's reading is probably: "As (Jesus) went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them..." (Mark 6:34a).

We might have expected a very different response to the crowds. We must remember that Jesus had just told the disciples that they all needed to get away and get some rest, and they were trying to get to the other side of the lake (the Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberias) before the crowds - so that they could rest - but what happened?

G. The crowds were motivated by the words, the actions, and the miracles of Jesus from the previous days and weeks and they were determined to get to the place where Jesus was going even before Jesus and the disciples got there (and they did!). So, instead of "getting away to a deserted place" for some rest and relaxation, Jesus and the disciples (already bone-weary) come face-to-face with yet another crowd! How they reacted to this crowd shows the difference between compassion and selfishness.
II. Compassion is quite a word - and really one of the best words to describe the love of God and Jesus Christ for all of humankind!

A. Compassion is the deep awareness of the suffering of another - coupled with the wish to help relieve that suffering. That is actually the human definition of compassion, but for God and Jesus it would need to be modified somewhat. The definition of compassion for God and Jesus would more correctly read: the deep awareness of the suffering of humankind - coupled with the ability and the desire to relieve that suffering. Yes, Jesus has compassion and power! The passage for today says, "And wherever he (Jesus) went, into the villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed" (Mark 6:56).

B. This was not some kind of magic trick! Jesus' cloak wasn't a magic devise that healed those who touched it. Their healing came from their faith that the person wearing this cloak was the Son of God and therefore he had the power to heal them! But, what was it about the crowds that got Jesus' attention? The reading says, "They were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34b). They appeared to be lost! They were without direction in their lives. The miraculous thing is that Jesus is powerful enough to take on the wants and needs of the entire crowd. Regular humans would have to say, "I'm sorry, I can only deal with you one at a time. It may be days or weeks before I can get to all of
you. If you are patient (and take a number please) I’ll get to you as soon as I can.”

C. Humans (like the disciples) probably would have sized-up the situation and said, “This is just too big! There are far too many people here and we can’t possibly help them all, so I will just pass through them (with the help of some personal bodyguards) and make my way to my motel room - where, finally I will get that much needed rest and relaxation that I deserve so much!”

D. The crowd looked as if they didn’t have any direction - they didn’t really know what to do or where to go. But, once Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was there - then they had direction. They had a focus - and that focus was Jesus!

III. Another way to talk about this is to talk about being lost.

A. Being lost is a terrible feeling! Jesus knew this and said to the disciples when he sent them out to teach and preach, “Go to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 10:6). We, my friends, are the modern-day “lost sheep” of Israel. We are “lost,” and God’s heart is broken because of our “lostness.”

B. To that point some of you may be saying, “I’m not lost!” It’s painful to admit our lostness. We are very capable, intelligent, productive people, but we often tend to focus our lives on the wrong things. For many folks being involved in things (working) is the beginning and ending of life. They live to work and work to live. Life is just one work-day after another. They focus mostly on the work they do (volunteer or otherwise). For some other folks it
is worries that dominate their lives. Others live for other things, but it is the fact that most of us live for things of this world, rather than living to serve God. Those wrong focuses are all signs of our “lostness.”

C. So, the question arises, “How do we ‘lost-ones’ spell relief?” Some might spell it G*O*L*F or C*R*A*F*T*S or T*E*N*I*S or even G*R*A*N*D*C*H*I*L*D*R*E*N. For many busy pastors - relief might come in the form of a cartoon that I saw with a pastor standing beside a train. The train cars were filled with happy travelers - all waving and shouting to the pastor alongside the track. And the caption reads: “Sure, it cost Pastor Smith a lot of money to send the entire congregation on a vacation, but it was well worth it!”

D. Seriously though, if we have gotten anything from this reading we should realize that relief for us (as Christians) is spelled in several (all-related) ways: J*E*S*U*S and C*O*M*P*A*S*S*I*O*N and P*R*A*Y*E*R. But television and the world would try to make us think that we can get relief from Rolaids or from other drugs or consumer products. However, as lost Christians, we know that relief truly comes from one of those four-lettered words. How do we really spell relief? L*O*V*E! Amen.