

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 21-22, 2012

Mark 6:30-44

“Feeding the Flock”

We woke up this past Friday morning to the terrible and tragic news of a shooting rampage in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater. At the midnight screening of the new Batman movie, “The Dark Knight Rises,” a 24-year-old man opened fire in the theater, killing twelve people – including young children – and injuring dozens of others. Even as investigators get at the “why” of this unbelievable act of violence, our hearts and prayers go out to families of victims. May the Lord God give comfort to all those who grieve and suffer. Even as we have this on our minds, the eyes of the world will soon be upon the 30th Summer Olympic Games that begin next Friday, July 27 in London. At the Opening Ceremony, athletes from 204 nations around the world will make their entrance during the Parade of Nations. It’s always amazing to watch the different competitions and see how a fraction of a second can make all the difference. But one thing we don’t hear too much about is all the food that’s served during the Olympics. Here are some facts about all that food: 14 million meals served each day at 40 different locations for 23,900 athletes and team officials, 160,000 individuals in the workforce, 20,600 broadcasters and press, 4,800 Olympic and Paralympic Family, plus all those included in the 9 million ticket sales. And here’s what’s needed: 25,000 loaves of bread, 232 tons of potatoes, more than 82 tons of seafood, 31 tons of poultry, more than 100 tons of meat, 75,000 liters of milk, 19 tons of eggs, 21 tons of cheese, and more than 330 tons of fruit and vegetables. Those are staggering amounts of food! And for all those caterers, there is a pledge to serve “the best of British” food during the Olympic and Paralympic Games (*source: <http://britishfood.about.com/od/introtobritishfood/a/Food-Facts-London-Olympic-Games-2012.htm>*).

In the appointed Scripture lessons for today, we hear about the role of the Shepherd who feeds his flock – not only with food for the body, but also with justice and righteousness. In the Old Testament lesson (Jeremiah 23:1-6), the Lord has strong words for those who are so-called shepherds of his flock – kings and priests. Instead of tending and feeding the flock, they destroy and scatter them. The Lord God says that He himself will attend to them for their evil deeds, and He will ultimately raise up a true shepherd who will be called **“The Lord is our righteousness”** (Jeremiah 23:6). The words of that beloved Psalm 23 paint a picture of peaceful security: **“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake”** (Psalm 23:1-3). These are some of the most familiar passages in all of Scripture and God’s people turn to them continually, especially in time of need. Even though we live in setting that is far removed from sheep and shepherding, the image of the Good Shepherd remains very near and dear to God’s people and speaks deeply to us. The words from both Jeremiah and David in the Old Testament lesson and Psalm 23 were written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, but in truth they point to him who fulfills all Scripture and is that Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep (see John 10:11).

Things were busy for Jesus and the disciples. They needed to get away for a little R and R. In the Gospel lesson, we’re told: **“For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat”** (Mark 6:31b). Some days are like that, right? It’s one thing after another, and it’s hard even to squeeze in lunch. Jesus’ vacation plans were interrupted because people chased him and the disciples down. They figured out where Jesus was going in the boat, ran around the lake, and were there waiting for him when the boat came ashore. How do we react when our vacation plans get interrupted? Rather than become frustrated or upset, Scripture tells us that Jesus’ reaction is one of compassion for all of these people: **“When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things”** (Mark 6:34). Sheep without a shepherd are

extremely vulnerable; a big bull's eye target for predators. In compassionate mercy for the needs of the sheep, the Good Shepherd multiplies what seems pitifully inadequate: five loaves of bread and two fish. From a human perspective, to consider that little bit of food to feed such a huge number of people seems ridiculous; even laughable. Why bother? And yet, little is much in the hands of Jesus. Through these, He feeds 5000 men (plus women and children!) until all ate and were satisfied. Not just that everyone got a nibble or a bite here! Everyone got all that he or she wanted, and were fully satisfied. What an amazing and generous Good Shepherd we have who willingly laid down his life for the flock, who leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake, and who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. The Good Shepherd is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), who feeds us with his life-giving Word and Sacraments.

So everything's good, right? As long as the sheep stick close to the Shepherd and listen to his voice, everything will be good. But that's the problem: we the sheep are prone to wander off in search of greener pastures. Sometimes we're not even aware that we're wandering, and sometimes we are fully aware of what we're doing and do it anyway. There's a difference between ignorance and willfulness. We the sheep like to think we know what's best for us. We set our own course, we go our own way, we do our own thing without checking in with the Shepherd. Almost invariably, this does not end well. Can it be that we who are well-educated, materially successful, and seem to have our act together are still **"like sheep without a shepherd?"** I'll say it again: sheep without a shepherd are extremely vulnerable; a big bull's eye target for predators. Fellow sheep, this is a call for us – no matter where we have been or what we have done – to return to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul the apostle tells us in today's Epistle lesson: **"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone"** (Ephesians 2:13, 19-20).

Thanks be to God for the Good Shepherd who feeds his flocks! Amen.