

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

A Dangerous Partnership

(Mark 6:30-45)

Study #11

Introduction: Working arrangements...

In case you have ever wondered, I did have a life prior to pastoring, and in that life I held a number of jobs. In every one of those jobs, I knew exactly what was expected of me, knew where I fit in the chain-of-command, and knew what tasks I was to perform.

Beginning my work life as a lawn-mowing pre-teen, I worked for the homeowner who hired me to mow, edge, and sweep. When I finished, he paid me.

In my High School years, I worked for a Kroger grocery store as a sacker and then as a stocker. I reported directly to my boss and did exactly what I was told. It was all very well-defined.

Several summer jobs during college followed that pattern, mostly in the construction field. I was an employee. I followed orders.

During seminary, I experienced a different arrangement. I was the sole proprietor of a (very) small window cleaning company - Point Window Cleaning - which I had purchased from a graduating student.

I was an independent contractor for the stores and homes where I cleaned glass. I was even an employer, providing a job for one or two other seminarians.

In that role, everything was pretty clear, too. I showed my employees how to clean glass, told them what stores to wash and when, and paid their (admittedly meager) salary.

Employee. Employer. Small business owner. Maybe you have experienced some or all of these roles, too.

One business role I have never had, though, is the role of being or having a partner. From lots of stuff that I've read, I'm OK with that. Partnerships can be risky.

If you take your financial advice from Dave Ramsey, you know that he doesn't think much of partnerships. And Dave is following the advice of his predecessors in Christian financial counseling (Larry Burkett and Ron Blue).

The danger in a business partnership, of course, is that one partner will be stronger than the other, will show himself or herself to be better equipped to do business, and will have to "carry" the weaker partner. That can understandably lead to hard feelings on the part of the strong partner.

Now, if you can find a stronger business person who will agree to be your partner, well, good for you! But if we were giving counsel to that potential partner, we would advise him or her to NOT be your partner, because he or she, the stronger, would be taking on all the risks of having you, the weaker, hanging around.

The Bible speaks to the dangers of partnerships - and talks about one dangerous partnership in particular A LOT. Today we'll think together about this dangerous partnership as we work our way through one of Jesus' more famous miracles.

Review

Last Sunday we noted that following Jesus will often involve rejection. Jesus was rejected. John the Baptist was rejected. Following Jesus may well mean rejection and challenges for us, too.

But, we are to still eagerly rush to obedience, knowing that the God who calls us to these obediences is GOOD!

As we catch up with Jesus this morning, the twelve are just returning from their first missionary journey, a journey where they did NOT experience rejection. They had gone out in pairs, and they showed up with glowing trip reports.

“R & R” for the Twelve - NOT! (vv. 30-34)

Twelve Thrilling Trip Reports (v. 30)

[30] The apostles¹ gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught.²

It's not hard to catch the excitement. They wanted Jesus to know about their successes. Mark has already told us that they had been **[6:13] casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.** And who knows what else they included in their reports as they told Jesus all that they had experienced on this ministry tour.

The twelve had covered a bunch of territory with the message about Jesus. Now everyone knows about Him. There was even a movement (not in Nazareth, of course) afoot to make Him King.³

It was a great trip. The disciples returned to Jesus triumphant - and exhausted. Given that exhaustion, He planned some time away for a little rest and refreshment.

Some Time Off for the Twelve (vv. 31-32)

[31] And He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.” (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) [32] They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

¹ Note that the twelve are referred to here as the apostles. Of the eighteen times the group is referred to in Mark, this is the only time they are called apostles.

² Check out the response Jesus gave after another trip (the mission of the 70), as recorded by Luke, “*And He said to them, ‘I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.’*” (Luke 10:18)

³ In light of His growing popularity, opposition from Herod and others grew. In light of that opposition Jesus withdrew from Galilee four separate times: once to the eastern shore of the sea (6:31-56); once to the region of Tyre and Sidon (7:24-30); once to Decapolis (7:31--8:9); once to Caesarea Philippi (8:10--9:50).

Interesting. Jesus didn't say, “*Come on, you big babies. Get with the program! Did you think apostleship was going to be a walk in the park?*”

No. He didn't say that. Jesus understood the importance of recharging personal batteries after a time of extended service. There are times to go full-bore, pedal to the metal. And there are times that call for rest and retreat.

So, Jesus traveled by boat with His tired disciples to a deserted area (not a desert) around the coastal town of Bethsaida-Julias⁴, located on the northeastern edge of the Sea of Galilee.

One scholar familiar with the region (Alfred Edersheim) estimated that it would have been a several hours' long sailing trip from the starting point to their destination.

Evidently, it was a shorter walk/run from Capernaum along the shore to Bethsaida-Julius than it was a sail, because by the time Jesus and the twelve arrived at their “secluded” spot, large crowds that would continue to swell throughout the day were already gathering to meet them.

A Sad Interruption for the Twelve (v. 33)

[33] The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them.

I think if I had been one of the twelve I would have been tempted to say, “*Shoot! There goes our time alone with Jesus. And I was so looking forward to resting.*”

We can all “get” that to have been planning on rest, alone, with Jesus, and to find instead this gathering throng of people meeting you at the shore might have been deflating.⁵

⁴ We learn this from Luke 9:10. The city was named by the Roman tetrarch Philip, after Caesar's daughter. It is not to be confused with a town by the same name on the western shore of Galilee, Peter and Andrew's home town. The site of this city (Bethsaida-Julius) was on the lower slope of the hill near the mouth of the Jordan.

⁵ One explanation for the large crowds is that they were already gathering for a trip south to celebrate the Passover in Judea. John's Gospel tells us that it was the

But that certainly wasn't the way Jesus dealt with this "intrusion" to His plans for a relaxing retreat.

Jesus Reached Out to the Crowd (v. 34)

[34] When Jesus went ashore, He saw a great crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.

Of course Jesus had been looking forward to some alone time with the twelve as much as they had been looking forward to the time with Him. That was the reason for having suggested the retreat in the first place. But, there isn't a hint of Him being annoyed at this interruption by the crowds.

He saw this crowd streaming out into the deserted place to be with Him and His heart ached for them.

As Mark tells us, Jesus saw them as sheep without a shepherd (and THAT is one pathetic picture!). When He saw shepherdless sheep, His emotions got all churned. He felt compassion for them.⁶

And His compassion for the shepherdless sheep outweighed His personal desire for rest (isn't it likely that He Himself was exhausted?).

The needs of shepherdless sheep always got attention from Jesus. They were always His priority. They always got top billing. After all, He is the Good Shepherd.

NOW, with all these people coming to Him, there could be no question of rest. His compassion muscles were flexed. He saw the swelling crowds as an open door from His Father.

So, He began to teach them.

Who knows what or for how long the Lord taught the crowds? If they had arrived in the morning, or even around noon, several hours of interaction and teaching could have easily passed by the time somebody noticed it was past time to eat.

A Miracle of Multiplication (vv. 35-44)

An Unrealistic Assignment (vv. 35-37)

The disciples counsel Jesus (vv. 35-36)

[35] When it was already quite late, His disciples came up to Him and said, "This place is desolate and it is already quite late; [36] send them away so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

So, hats off to the disciples. They prove themselves observant, forward-looking men. They took in the scene as the day wore on and pulled Jesus aside, who had obviously overlooked the obvious, to let Him know the score.

"Pssst, Jesus, the people are hungry."

The largest nearby town we know of to which these crowds could have traveled to find food would have been Bethsaida-Julius. And there were no doubt other little villages nearby, all of them with the full complement of McDonald's, Wendy's, and Papa John's.

The sun was tilting toward the western horizon, and it was high time for Jesus to close in prayer and dismiss these good folks.

Jesus listened politely to this sage advice from His followers - and then responded with a comment that must have seemed to have come out of left field.

Jesus gives an impossible assignment (v. 37a)

[37a] But He answered and said to them, "You give them something to eat!"

Passover season, which would make it springtime, when the grasses were lush and green - just right for a late afternoon picnic.

⁶ The Hebrew word for "compassion" derives from the same word as that for "womb," indicating that the one who has compassion on someone else experienced the same emotions as a mother's maternal feelings for her unborn child.

THAT must have seemed to have been a ridiculous thing to say. Jesus has charged these guys with an impossible task.

No amount of positive thinking or happy self-talk or optimism can alter the fact that the disciples can not do what Jesus told them to do.

The clear-thinking apostles replied to Jesus' logistically impossible suggestion.

Confused to the max! (v. 37b)

[37b] And they said to Him, 'Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them something to eat?'

Looking at the enormous crowds, they knew that to feed these people - not to fill them up, just to give them each something to eat - would have required half of a year's pay!

I wonder what was going on in the minds of the twelve as they spoke those words...

- Did they think that Jesus was being cruel?
- Did they think He was kidding?
- Would they have resented the suggestion, since, after all, these people had come out to see HIM, after all, hadn't they? Would they have wanted to turn the tables on Jesus and tell Him, "*No, YOU give them something to eat!*"
- I wonder if Jesus had a grin on His face when He told them to give the crowds something to eat.

The Bible is a very provocative book, and it usually gives us just the details necessary to know what is going on while leaving many, many details to the imagination.

Asking these kinds of questions is part of the meditation process that takes us into the world of the Bible. When we ask questions of the text we are using the Bible passage as a "passageway" to a whole new world.

Well, Jesus didn't press the point and tell them again, "*I told YOU to give them something to eat.*"

No, He Himself sprang into action, first taking inventory of the food stores that were on hand.

The Disciples Feed a Crowd (vv. 38-41)

Inventory (v. 38)

[38] And He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go look!" And when they found out, they said, "Five and two fish."

That's not much food for such a crowd.

John's Gospel supplies the further details that the food belonged to a little boy who was willing to share his lunch, and that the flat loaves of bread common to the area were made of barley, the poorest type of bread.

The fish were sardine-sized, could be eaten without cooking (kosher-friendly), and were typically sandwiched by the bread.

Positions (vv. 39-40)

[39] And He commanded them all to recline by groups on the green grass. And they reclined in companies of hundreds and of fifties.

Quick. Do you think that the disciples have a clue as to what Jesus was intending to do? Do you think that they suspected a miracle? (me neither)

Regardless as to whether or not they had an inkling about what He was planning on doing, they did what He told them to do, arranging the great crowd of people into smaller groupings.

Then Jesus reached into the basket where the fish and loaves were, pulled them out and gave thanks to God.

Distribution (v. 41)

[41] And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves and He kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided up the two fish among them all.

After blessing it, He reached His hand into the wicker basket, again, and pulled out another handful of fish and bread, and handed it to one of the disciples to give to the group of fifty nearest him.

And the food just kept on coming. He did this over and over again, pulling an inexhaustible store of food from this small basket for the disciples to give to the crowd.

Don't miss that. In the final analysis it can truly be said that the disciples did what Jesus commanded them.

Sure, He multiplied the fish and loaves. But, they did what they had realistically said that they were unable to do. They fed the multitudes.

Mark wraps up the narrative of the miracle with some facts and figures.

Leftovers (vv. 42-44)

[42] They all ate and were satisfied, [43] and they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish. [44] There were five thousand men who ate the loaves.

Thousands are fed

First, the fish and loaves that Jesus multiplied satisfied everybody's appetite. All five thousand of the men in attendance at this picnic were full, and so were the women and children.

The people didn't just get a little bit, or a taste. The meal wasn't like the tidbit we all get when we take the Lord's Supper here on the first Sunday of the month. It was more like the meal we enjoy on a brunch Sunday. At the end of the day, the people's bellies were full.

This miracle highlights Jesus' great compassion. He was eager to serve people who were hungry. He served them food, and He will soon feed them with something more substantial.

If Jesus was concerned to fill bellies, He was even more concerned to fill souls.

Millions are saved

It is not a stretch to suggest that the feeding of the five thousand foreshadowed Jesus' just-around-the-corner sacrifice on the cross to satisfy the eternal hunger in each person's heart for God and for forgiveness.⁷

He will give Himself on a Roman cross to be the food that will provide for the salvation of every person who trusts in Him.

Second, this miracle taught the disciples something critical to their careers as Jesus followers - and it is just as critical to Jesus followers today.

Disciples are used

Among all of the miracles Jesus performed, this one was VERY important. Except for the resurrection, this is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospel writers.

In his not very subtle conclusion to this incident, Mark tells us that it took twelve baskets to gather up the food that wasn't eaten. As you know, I'm no math whiz, but that looks pretty close to exactly one full basket of leftovers for each disciple.

Clearly, Jesus wanted these guys to remember this miracle. He virtually guaranteed they would remember it by having a basket of leftovers for each one.

But what was it about this miracle that was so important that He wanted it indelibly etched in His followers' minds?

Partners with God!

Now, in what I'm about to say, I'm not implying that I know better than Jesus when He should have and when He should not have used His miracle-working power.

⁷ This, in fact, is precisely the point of the feeding of the five thousand as John records it. The Bread of Life discourse, which followed the feeding in John 6, shows Jesus using the multiplication of the fish and loaves as an illustration of the need to place trust in Him for salvation.

However, it does seem to me that here, He used that power without sufficient cause. Here there was no crisis.

In Capernaum, He went to heal Jairus' daughter because she was at death's door. In the Decapolis, He cast out demons from the man known as "Legion" because that demonized man had been so horribly abused by the demons.

But, here, there is no emergency. The disciples had made the very reasonable suggestion that Jesus send the crowds into the nearby villages to get something to eat. They weren't in danger of starvation.⁸

Something else beyond meeting the physical hunger of the crowds was going on that prompted Jesus to multiply fish and loaves.

And I believe that what was going on was Jesus' concern that His followers understand something about their relationship with Him.

Do you remember the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' charge concerning the multitudes' hunger, "***You give them something to eat!***"

They were confused, maybe even frustrated, because they knew that they didn't have the resources to provide food for the crowds. They were being REALISTS when they offered up the only solution they could think of - go buy bread!

Jesus, however, did have the resources. And, had He only been interested in filling the bellies of a hungry crowd of people, He could have easily told the twelve to join the multitudes in the chow line.

But, He was concerned to illustrate the nature of the ministry in which they were going to invest their lives. That is why He wanted THEM to distribute the food which He provided to the crowds.

And, what the Lord taught the disciples about the nature of serving God on the day of that miracle, He wants to impress upon you and me today.

⁸ This is in contrast, by the way, with the second feeding of the four thousand, where the multitudes had been with Jesus for three days and there was no chance to procure food from the surrounding areas.

We aren't **spectators** who sit on the sidelines, idly watching God work.

Neither are we **independent contractors** or **employees**. God does not simply give us a task to perform and then say, "*Go get 'em, tiger!*"

The tasks in which God wants us to involve ourselves are on a par with the task given to the twelve apostles of feeding thousands of people with five loaves and two fish.

Conclusion:

He has enlisted you and me in a work for which we are, quite frankly, incapable.

The New Testament tells us to interact with other people lovingly, make the good news of the Gospel clear, challenge those around us to love and good deeds, genuinely engage with our brothers and sisters in Christ when they err, and give of our resources to those in need.

Each one of those items are tasks that we can do. You can give money to resource ministry. I can choose to be loving. We can all choose to not fake it, but to be honest with others.

But, what none of us can do is work in another person's heart. We cannot change someone's mind or their life.

For those tasks - the **results** part - we say with the apostle Paul, [2 *Corinthians 2:16*] ***And who is adequate for these things?***⁹

So, serving Jesus is more than being sent out to perform a task as a contractor is sent to a job site. It is more than being given an assignment from a boss.

⁹ Paul went on to say that his adequacy in Christian ministry came by way of partnership in 2 Corinthians 3, [5] ***Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, [6] who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.***

The one most satisfactory metaphor for our role in the great work of Jesus is the one that is the most *unsatisfactory* in the business world, the one that is most fraught with danger - especially for the strong. We are **partners** with God.¹⁰

God has taken upon Himself all the risks. He is the Strong Partner and we are the weak. And He is the One who has invited us to this partnership. He wants us to be involved in what He is doing in the world.

On a hillside in Galilee Jesus provided the resources of fish and bread while the disciples dished out the food to the crowds.

Today, He changes lives, saves souls, brings freedom to addicts, and restores families, while we love, serve, speak, and pray.

Every day you and I face shepherdless sheep, people who are spiritually starved. It will be up to us to ***“give them something to eat.”***

We know that we don't have what it takes to feed them on our own. But, in **PARTNERSHIP WITH JESUS**, those sheep can find a Shepherd, can find a full meal.

He gives us the dignity of letting us do what we can do - pray, speak, work - and then does Himself what only He can do.

[1 Corinthians 3:9]For we are God's fellow workers...

¹⁰ References to believers having fellowship/partnering with the Gospel or with God Himself: 1 Cor. 1:9 - ***“God is faithful, through whom you were called into partnership/fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”***; 1 John 1:3 - ***“what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”***; 1 Cor. 9:23 - ***“And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”***; 3 John 1:8 - ***“Therefore we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers with the truth.”***