

SERMON SERIES: Jesus and Health
SERMON TITLE: #4--"Jesus and Societal Health"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 6:14-44
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 23, 2015, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The story of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish to feed the multitude is found in each of the four gospels. And, if you include the feeding of the 4000, as well as the 5000, the story appears six times. That's why it's so familiar to us. The gruesome story of the death of John the Baptist may not be so familiar, though, and, before this week, I never really put those two stories together in my mind. But, you know, they do kind of go together in a very opposite sort of way. Right after Herod served up John the Baptist's head on a platter at his dinner party, Jesus provided a dinner of bread and fish for the hungry crowd.

These two stories are next in line in our August sermon series on Jesus and Health. As we've been making our way through Mark chapters five and six, we've seen Jesus promoting mental health, physical health, and relational health. In this next section of scripture, we find Jesus once again bringing health to a sick situation. Let's dig into these stories and see what we can learn from Jesus about societal health.

1—LEADERSHIP MATTERS

As I look at these two stories, one right after the other, what I see first is that leadership matters. In many ways, you can't compare Herod and Jesus, because they came from such different paradigms. Herod was granted his power by the occupying Roman government, and Jesus was an upstart, itinerant Jewish preacher whose only apparent authority came from the people who followed him. But that's exactly the point. Because Herod's leadership was backed by the force of the armies of the Roman emperor, he didn't have to give much consideration to the needs of the occupied people.

Herod could ignore their moral expectations. He could silence their spokespersons through imprisonment. Herod could entertain his friends and family with expensive dinners at his palace. He could indulge in drunken and reckless promises to his daughter, and then carry them out, in order to save face with his social and political cronies. Cold and calculating, Herod set aside whatever twinge of guilt or regret he might have had. Behind the walls of his mighty fortress, Herod could destroy life on a whim, without concern for the consequences.

The leadership Jesus provided was starkly different. In the earlier verses of Mark 6, Jesus had sent out his disciples two by two to the villages to preach and to heal. Now, in verse 30, the disciples had just returned from their missions. Jesus wanted to take them by boat to a deserted place, where they could eat. Like Herod, Jesus wanted to feed his friends. After their hard work, they needed and deserved a little rest and relaxation. But, as soon as Jesus and the disciples got off the boat, the crowds appeared again, seeking attention.

If Jesus had insisted on avoiding the needy throng, he and the disciples would have gotten back on the little boat and sailed away. But Jesus didn't separate himself from the people. Instead, Mark 6:34 tells us that "Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." The Jews had a long history of thinking of their king as a shepherd. But the governmental leader who had the office and the responsibility of shepherd wasn't doing his job. The sheep were restless. The sheep were lost. The sheep were suffering and oppressed. The sheep were hungry. The sheep didn't know where to turn for help. So, instead of hiding behind palace walls or sailing away in the boat, Jesus stepped up and filled the leadership gap. Jesus took matters into his own hands. Mark 6:34 says that "Jesus began to teach the people many things."

This chapter of Mark doesn't describe the many things that Jesus taught the crowd that day. But, based on what else is written in the four gospels, we can pretty well guess that Jesus might have talked to them about the kingdom of God—a time in the future, yes, but more importantly, the good

and positive way that God wanted their life to be even now. As Jesus painted the picture of God's kingdom, the people would have imagined a life of blessedness—a kingdom in which those who mourn are comforted, where those who hunger are filled, where those who make peace are called children of God, and where those who are persecuted for doing the right thing can be glad because they know their reward will come. Jesus would have spoken to them about how to get along with each other, even when forgiveness is difficult. Jesus would have instructed them how to be faithful to God, even when it requires selling all that you have so you can give it away to the poor. Jesus would have emphasized purity of the heart and not just the show of outward appearances. Jesus would have told those 5000 men to respect the young and the weak and that greatness comes through serving others. Jesus would have invited those who were sick and burdened to come to him, so he could give them rest.

Jesus would have taught the people these things because Jesus was a good shepherd. Jesus knew that the only way to have societal health was to have a leader who loved and cared for the sheep. Jesus knew that leadership matters.

2—PARTICIPATION MATTERS

A second truth we see in these stories is that participation matters. If we want societal health, then the people have to get involved. In the account of the beheading of John the Baptist, King Herod acted as he did, at least in part, because of the expressed wishes of his daughter and her mother. As political leaders are apt to do, Herod took a poll. He asked what his daughter wanted, and, after she consulted with her mother, Herod's daughter rushed to tell him. Herod had some reservations, but was swayed by the opinions that were presented to him.

Participation of the people also mattered in the situation with Jesus and the crowd. After listening to Jesus' teaching, the people had become hungry. The disciples reported this to Jesus, and advised him to send the people away so they could buy food for themselves. As a strong and compassionate leader, Jesus heard the part about the people being hungry. But Jesus wasn't going to

be persuaded to send the people away. Instead, Jesus used this opportunity to teach his disciples and the big crowd just how much participation matters.

In the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, participation began when the disciples went looking for food to feed the crowd. Fortunately, they found someone willing to share five loaves and two fish. The Gospel of John says that the food was donated by a boy. Mark doesn't explain that detail. The important thing is that *someone or some ones* made that first contribution to the cause. Someone participated for the good of the whole.

Then Jesus instructed the disciples how to increase the participation even more. The disciples were to divide up the crowd into groups of 50 and 100. A huge crowd of 5000 wasn't very manageable. Maybe Jesus could gain and hold the attention of such a large number, but the disciples weren't ready for that yet, and neither was anyone else who was there that day. But, in the smaller groups, the disciples and others would stand out as natural leaders. They would be able to guide their groups to sit on the grass in an orderly manner, so they could get organized.

And as those leaders guided the groups, the 5000 apparently cooperated. They got involved and did their part. Whether they really stretched five loaves and two fish over that many people or the crowd started pulling more food out of their backpacks and satchels, we'll never know. But we can be sure that the miracle of the feeding didn't happen just because Jesus broke five loaves and two fish. The miracle happened because 5000 people got involved and did their part to bring about a great result. In Mark 6:43, we read that there was more than enough food for everyone. Even if many of the participants in this great miracle weren't able to contribute in any other way, maybe they helped on clean up detail—gathering up the 12 baskets of leftovers. The fantastic outcome depended not only on leadership at the top. For societal health, everyone's participation matters.

CONCLUSION

On Friday, I went to Christ United Methodist Church in Salt Lake City, so I could attend the United Methodist Women's Mission U class on Latin America. During that class, the teacher showed us a video called *A Force More Powerful*. The video told the story of how the Chilean people overcame military dictator Augusto Pinochet, whose reign of terror was characterized by the disappearance, torture, and death of thousands of Chilean citizens. The non-violent protests against Pinochet began one day in 1983 with a mass slowdown of work. That evening, thousands of people banged on their pots and pans for several hours in a show of solidarity for the cause. In the five years that followed, the Chilean people held non-violent marches and other forms of non-violent protests that grew larger and larger. Some of the protesters were killed by Pinochet's government. But more people got involved and convinced yet others to overcome their paralysis of fear and do what needed to be done. Because their methods were so good, the anti-Pinochet movement won the hearts and minds of the majority of the population. When, in 1988, it became clear that Pinochet had to leave his position, it was also clear that the victory for Chile's societal health was won because of the huge and positive engagement of the mass population.

Whether our leaders are miraculously great, tyrannically terrible, or something in between, the burden of a healthy society isn't on their shoulders all alone. Societal health will never be gained or maintained if the citizens are apathetic, uninvolved, or too afraid to act. The participation of the people is essential. Jesus the healer teaches us that, if we want societal health, then both leadership and participation matter.