

## **Feast of St. Christopher. July 22, 2018. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56.**

Today we are celebrating the feast day of our patron saint, St. Christopher. Of course everyone is familiar with the long association of Christopher with ice cream, so later in the day we'll have an ice cream social, and at some of our services today we have extra acolytes and incense and all morning long we're trying to celebrate. But while we're doing some special things today, we don't have special readings. We decided just to continue on our steady way reading through the gospel of Mark. It makes for an interesting confluence of stories: the legend of St. Christopher, the 106 year history of this parish, and the story from Mark of the apostles returning from their mission to go try preaching the gospel on their own.

I'm not sure why our forebears chose St. Christopher as patron. The parish history just says that after considering several names, the founders of this parish chose Christopher. But it has proven to be an appropriate choice. Christopher's legend doesn't involve rising to high ecclesiastical ranks and writing long theological tomes polemicizing against heresy. Instead, his faithful fame was won by rolling up his sleeves—or perhaps his cloak—and getting to work helping those in need.

The legend goes that after his conversion this giant of a man set himself the Christian service of carrying travelers across a treacherous stream. One day, and forgive me if you've heard this but many of us are new, a baby shows up to cross the stream and Christopher of course helps as he always does. It turns out to be a very heavy baby and Christopher can barely get him across. Safe on the shore, he tells the baby, "Wow! You were so heavy that I felt like I was carrying the whole world across the stream!" And the baby says, "Oh, that's because I'm Jesus who created the world, so you were carrying the world and its shaper on your back." Christopher in Greek means "Christ-bearer," in a striking instance of nominative determinism.

This story has always worked for the St. C's parish that I have known: a parish thoroughly committed to rolling up its sleeves, willing to get wet and even take dangerous risks on behalf of neighbors in need. A parish more concerned with faithfulness than status, more interested in work than finery. And that work we're so ready to do in a hundred forms is to bear Christ to each other and the world. To carry the love of God as best we can to a world in desperate need of care and hope.

That need only seems to be getting more desperate. I'm sure that I'm not the only one who feels like there's just too much going on—every week it feels like there's a new most pressing need. And the whole time that big headline catastrophes are relentlessly erupting, the same old intractable local and personal problems murmur along in danger of becoming insidiously invisible. If we are called to carry the love and good news of Christ, how many directions can we possibly carry them at once? And how do we decide which directions take priority?

I don't have a great answer for this. The needs of God's children are always pressing, and ranking oppressions and needs has never been an effective route to justice. At our best, we carry Christ with us wherever we go and share that hope and help with everyone we encounter. But it is exhausting, which brings me to this passage in Mark.

Mark is picking up the threads of a story we read two weeks ago, when Jesus sent out the Twelve to try preaching on their own. Mark's narrative doesn't follow them, but instead cuts away to a flashback of the death of John the Baptist. So we don't know exactly how it went, but we can imagine. These guys aren't, in general, paragons of adult competency. Everywhere they go with Jesus, the people flock to them but they play a support role, behind the scenes. Now they've just been each upfront and center, the ones preaching and answering questions and being asked to heal and feed the tremendously needy people. We don't know how successful they were, but we do know the effect that addressing those needs had on them. Jesus takes one look at them and says: you guys need a vacation. Let's go to a deserted place.

There are two things, here. First, we need rest and it is okay to seek it, even if the needs are still there. And second, just because we need it and seek it doesn't mean that we'll actually get it. Jesus and the apostles try to sneak off for a vacation, but the crowds see and follow them. Our reading today cuts out a few verses that give us a count of the crowd: this passage rightfully includes the feeding of the five thousand, so the deserted place gets populated pretty quickly once Jesus shows up. This is one the risks of following our calling of traveling with Jesus.

This failed vacation seems like bad news. So let me just call our attention to who actually does the healing, teaching, and feeding in this passage. It is Jesus who invites us to rest and it is Jesus who actually meets the needs of the people. Our roles are very important and we have tremendously vital work to do. And, we cannot save the world. It is when we believe that we are the world's saviors that we decide we cannot rest and it is then that we become destructive even in our best intentions, because we have then become idolators. We are called to bear Christ to the world; but it is Christ who saves that world. Amen.