July 22, Ordinary 16B (Mark 6:30-34, 53-56)

The apostles are on fire in this Gospel passage. I don't always get along with people like that.

by Malinda Elizabeth Berry in the July 4, 2018 issue

Whenever I sit down with a Gospel passage, I notice how Anabaptist and Mennonite I am as a reader.

I become very aware of Anabaptism's strong missionary consciousness, which expects the faithful church to be in some kind of unresolvable tension with "the world." This consciousness is coupled with a theological vision that emphasizes discipleship, voluntary community, and the way of love. I also notice the eclectic marks of my midwestern Mennonite tribe: a strong sense of communal discipline, a critique of liturgical worship and sacramentalism, and an insistence on boundaries between community and society—boundaries that both provide sociological cohesion and preserve religious identity. (I am drawing on missiologist Wilbert Shenk's distinction between "Anabaptist" and "Mennonite.")

When I read this week's Gospel passage with my Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutical bifocals, my first reaction is to be very impressed with what the apostles are up to. It's a powerful and attractive picture: a community of people deeply occupied with vital pastoral, life-saving work. Who doesn't want to be involved in something as pleasantly exhausting as bringing a new, hopeful message, with tangible results, to towns and villages suffering debilitating oppression and violence? And who among us hasn't skipped a meal here or there because there was more important work to be done? I wonder what it would take for my congregation to be on fire like this.

But then my internal realist reminds me that I don't usually get along very well with people who are on fire like that. As a feminist theologian, I advocate for things like well-designed and highly participatory discernment processes, and that takes time. In congregational life, I don't like it when individuals expect the group to endorse their entrepreneurial outreach efforts without real conversation. In other words, if

you and I are going to be about “building the kingdom” together, then I want us to do it well.

My Christian pilgrimage as a theologian, teacher, family member, and congregant has opened and matured to draw on many theological and spiritual streams of Christian tradition. But as I try to keep my discipleship commitments to Jesus Christ, I don’t know if I will ever shake off the constraining Mennonite spirituality of striving. This existential struggle means I also struggle to hear good news in Mark’s message.

According to Monika Fander, Mark 1:14–8:26 paints a picture of “who Jesus is and who belongs to him.” While that sounds simple enough, we have to remember that in this identity-forging period, Jesus is raising more than a few eyebrows. God’s in-breaking reign—what I like to call “God’s great shalom”—is manifesting through miracles (healing and feeding), through exorcisms, and even in and through the landscape (parables and calming the storm). Fander also points out that at the same time Jesus is gaining notoriety for his miracles and for drawing marginalized people to the center of his work, he is facing mounting criticism and even rejection from his family and the community where he grew up.

It seems that if Jesus is going to build the kingdom well, he’s going to be taking a lot of risks. And if you and I are going to help him, we’re signing up for the same thing: criticism and rejection, which will prove we’re doing things the right way. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt. 5:11). “Enter through the narrow gate…. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13a, 14). “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14).

But is this really what *Mark* is saying? This week’s lectionary reading unfortunately bypasses verses 35 to 52, which include the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus’ calming the storm. (John’s version of both events appears next week.) Along with creating confusion in the timeline of Mark’s story, this omission sets aside the central action of the passage: the feeding of the 5,000. In providing the multitude with bread and fish, Jesus directs our attention to a biblical principle: it is important that sheep be attended by a good and faithful shepherd (Num. 27:17, 1 Kings 22:17, Ezek. 34:8–23). As he shepherds this immense flock, Jesus is interested in making sure everyone has something good to eat physically, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

Jesus' actions, D. Cameron Murchison explains, demonstrate how "God's economy of plenty" works. "The disciples see that, when the resources God has entrusted to his people are received in thanksgiving and shared with generosity, there is enough. No recourse is needed to increase the food supply in order to feed the hungry." This divine economy is different from the economies we know, Murchison adds, which are fueled by growth and overconsumption. God's economy of plenty makes flourishing possible, specifically the flourishing described in Mark 6:53–56.

Reminding people that they haven't eaten and need to, feeding strangers and friends who are hungry, and having more than enough—this, not being edgy, entrepreneurial, or toughing it out on the narrow path, is good news to those of us all too familiar with the spirituality of striving.