

PUMPED

A Sermon on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
July 19, 2015—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

1.

[While playing box drum in a heartbeat rhythm]

Bum bum, bum bum, bum bum, bum bum...

The heart, is an, awe-some, or-gan

Pumps our, blood a, -round our, bod-ies

Draws blood, in and, sends it, back out,

Cir-cu-, lat-ing, day in, day out

Nev-er, cea-sing, to do, its work,

Sus-tains, life in-, fin-ite, in worth,

Thank you God for our working hearts!

Bum bum, bum bum, bum bum, bum bum...

3-4 billion: that's the approximate number of times a human heart beats in the average-spanned American life these days. Our tickers, our hearts! The pump of our lifeblood, the engine behind our bodies' blood mobile, the "delivery service inside us"ⁱ—picking up and dropping off oxygen, nutrients, carbon dioxide, and toxins, not to mention white blood cells that fight infection and other foreign bodies. The heart takes blood flowing through our veins, into its atria and ventricles, to propel it back out to lung or limb. Draws blood in and sends it out.

2.

There's no reference in today's reading to a heart or blood, but nevertheless it's all about flow. In one sense, today's reading exemplifies a lack of flow, a broken flow or rhythm, an arrhythmia.

This is a lectionary reading, which a bunch of scholars and religious leaders recommended as a three year cycle of readings. The scholar broke today's readings into two snippets in between better known stories. The first snippet begins after Jesus has sent out his twelve inner disciples to heal and preach. He welcomes them back in, and expects to facilitate some reflection session like a ministry supervisor. But his outdoor office teems with people who yearn to hear and be near Jesus. Time for retreat, Jesus says, for the 12 to rest and then reflect together.

But as soon as they're in the boat to find a deserted place, the crowds catch on and get to that deserted place before Jesus and company even arrive. The crowds trigger Jesus' pity. They're like sheep without a shepherd, Mark writes, reminding us of the shepherd of Psalm 23 but also of Israel and the exodus, with Moses as their leader and shepherd. So Jesus speaks to them. Next come the feeding of the five thousand and the boat trip that leads to Jesus waking on the water. But the lectionary skips over those two miracles, and instead restarts when the boats land in Gennesaret and a new crowd forms as soon as they identify Jesus.

The people who came up with this reading were willing to take away all the flow that's there. They cut up Mark left and right, dismember the story, butcher Mark until all we have left are a few of Jesus' words and several scene changes. The miracles and impressive scenes, the context around them, are missing.

And yet in these snippets we do find another kind of flow. Everywhere in this reading, people are flowing toward Jesus like blood toward a pumping heart. Disciples return from being sent out, and they gather around Jesus. The first crowd sees Jesus depart and they follow suit, staying near until, it's implied, he's preached and fed them. Then others see he's shown up in their town and they bring out anyone who might need a touch of healing. Everything is heading toward Jesus, drawn in like blood in veins.

Everybody needs something from Jesus. The disciples need perspective and encouragement, the first crowd needs spiritual and physical nourishment, the second crowd needs healing. There is more than enough need to keep Jesus busy! He cherishes rest and prayer, and yet he has compassion for the vast majority of people who come to him.

2.

We can relate. A baby cries in the middle of the night and a parent draws them in to feed them, burp them, change their diaper. An adult child of a parent with memory loss and other health issues makes numerous calls a day to doctors and caregivers. An employee works simultaneously on several projects with upcoming deadlines. A college student goes to class, studies and writes papers, then works nights to help for their education. For those of us in such situations or in countless others, we can feel like little more than need fulfilling machines, like hearts that must keep pumping, that never get to take a break. Yet we have to take a break, we have needs, too, that yearn to be fulfilled—physical, emotional, spiritual. In some cases these needs can be met while meeting others' needs, but other times we do need a rest. We are human, after all.

Still, as frustrating as it can be to fulfill needs, how challenging is it to have intense needs and to feel so vulnerable and desperate that one is willing to get those needs fulfilled in front of others? This is what the crowds do in our reading: they pursue Jesus for meaning or help, not caring who sees them in their moment of need.

This is what happens to us these days in a more subtle way when we come to a pastor or friend, family member, neighbor or professional to receive help. In our culture that preaches self-sufficiency, we nevertheless need a good word, a good meal, a good hug, or healing despite any embarrassment that we may be "needy." We both fulfill needs and have needs and it's a lot of work to take care of needs on both sides.

3.

But the good news is that Jesus is the heart of our compassionate God, recognizing people in need, inviting them to be fulfilled. Jesus receives them, Jesus draws them in, Jesus has sympathy for them, Jesus does not coldly turn them away.

In today's reading he heals the sick; he teaches and feeds the yearning crowds. The disciples may have misgivings toward Jesus when he apparently cares for the crowds instead of teaching them. But they are actually the clearest example of how Jesus brings people through the divine cycle of compassion.

Before chapter six, Jesus has already been teaching the disciples for a while, he has already drawn them in a first time. And then before today's reading he sends them out in pairs to teach as he has done in front of them and heal as he has done in front of them. He's given them what they need. They go and then they come back. Pumped out and drawn back in. Yes, Jesus intends to let them talk about their experiences in peace, but, as I know, ministry's what happens when you're making other plans. In these moments Jesus shows them that they have to share the heart of the gospel with others whom God draws in and sends out. They're not the only blood in this body. Moreover, Jesus is transforming them from blood into hearts, too, sent out to draw others into a loving relationship with God. They have become blood and hearts, they shed blood sweat and tears and are cared for by the blood, sweat and tears of God.

4.

This is what we describe when we talk about the costs and joys of discipleship.

We have come here today because we have felt drawn into a time and place where we experience God's presence together, where we hope to be drawn into the heart of Christ together. Consistently I ask this congregation the crucial question that defines whether we continue to be a vital congregation, "Are faith and worship worth it?" I say the answer is still yes, first because as long as we yearn for healing, forgiveness, or God's Good Word, as long as we seek encouragement and accountability from fellow disciples, the time and money is already worth it to us. But that's just part of our

discipleship. Having drawn us into worship and faith community, God then sends us out by the force of the Holy Spirit into the world to offer the possibility of that same healing love and grace to others. Drawn in by God, sent out by God. We are pumped by the heartbeat of God's grace.

Or as Jamie Rude put it in our banner brainstorm last Sunday. Why don't we tell the community: "Spirit hungry? Well, come!" Through our worship we draw in those who are spiritually hungry to let God feed them. But at the end of the worship service we should also say, "Spirit nourished? Well, go!" Come in, be nourished and transformed, and go out.

Anglican minister Susan Hope writes that part of what God sends us out to do is to look and see in the crowds, to discern what nourishment other people need. Only by truly seeing others and their deep yearnings can we have the same kind of compassion that Jesus has for the crowds. Susan recalls a story a colleague Rich told her about going to a meeting on how the church could engage more effectively in the world. He was so busy he rushed by a man who was selling newspapers. After passing him by, Rich heard the Holy Spirit say to him, 'What could be more important than taking the opportunity to' interact with someone in need? After talking with the gentleman for a while, he asked what was on a sheet of paper next to him. The man responded, he recorded how many people walk by him and ignore him every day. In a matter of fact voice he explained that 781 people had passed him by just that morning. Rich asked his name. 'Peter,' he said. Do you know what your name means? 'Yes, it means the Rock!' Rich realized that he stood on holy ground, saying, 'yeah, Jesus promised to build his church in the rock. Do you feel like a rock?' 'No. I feel like a grain of sand.' His heart burned with compassion. How many more meetings and books and distractions did he need when he

could simply let God send him out and do it? (Mission-Shaped Spirituality, pages 22-25)

The good News is that God not only gives us the example and the ability and the Spirit to rest, to worship and retreat from the world, but also sends us into that world to engage in ministry like Christ's and to love with compassion like Christ's. We are pumped by God's heartbeat of discipleship.

When we are drawn into the heart of Christ, we not only receive the wisdom of his teachings and the healing of his Spirit, we also receive the grace that comes from the blood of the cross. For Christ, the one who draws us in, not only gives his power and love to us, he also gives his life for us. In Christian faith we are drawn into the very heart of God's love and hope for the world. We are drawn into Christ's death, but also Resurrection.

God draws us into communion with God in this life so that we may go and serve. But through this life, God has also sent us out into Christian living and discipleship, so that when this life is over, God may draw us back through the empty cross and the empty tomb into new life, Resurrection life.

God draws us in and sends us out.

But God sends us out and so that one day God may draw us back in into eternal love.

We are pumped by God's heartbeat of salvation.

Bum bum, bum bum, bum bum, bum bum
 God, your heartbeat is the center of life
 You love and heal and care with mercy
 Draw us in and send us back out
 Send us out and draw us to you
 Never ceasing to do your work
 Saving life, infinite in worth
 Thank you God for the heart of Christ
 Thank you God for the blood of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ "The Bloodmobile," *Here Comes Science*, They Might Be Giants.