

Proper 11A 2015 Sermon

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Jesus' disciples have just returned from the mission on which Jesus had sent them, and after that period of intense activity, Jesus seems to suggest they take a break. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while," he tells them. And then Mark adds, "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat."

This same statement – "coming and going, with no leisure even to eat" – could be said about the lives of many of us modern day, over-busy Americans. Holding down full-time jobs, raising a family with all that entails these days (soccer games, dance or music lessons, etc.), who has leisure to eat? Grab a bagel and head out the door in the morning, pick up a meal from some fast food restaurant and eat it in the car, or order in pizza. Even retirement is full of activity these days! So it is quite likely that Jesus' invitation to *us* would be the same as the invitation he gave to his disciples: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

We all need such times of "rest" in our day. Time intentionally carved out to re-center, to reconnect with our True Selves and with God. Many of us have learned the discipline of regular *physical* exercise, which is wonderful and important; but how many of us have a regular discipline of *spiritual* exercise, which is what **Jesus** practices, going into the wilderness, going off early in the morning by himself to pray? If Jesus and his disciples need such times in "deserted places" to "rest", how much more do you and I?

So if we are looking for the message of today's Gospel passage for us, we can start with this: "Have a regular spiritual practice." Jesus appears to have regularly attended synagogue on the Sabbath; gathering together in weekly worship is an important part of a regular spiritual practice. The author of the

Letter to the Hebrews writes, “Let us not give up the habit of meeting together . . .” (10:25) The fact that you are here today most likely means that weekly worship with the Body of Christ in this place is an important part of your spiritual practice.

But I have found more and more over the years that weekly worship is not *enough* for me; I must spend time daily in a practice that allows God to reconnect with me. For there is no doubt in my mind that the connection is always open on **God’s** end; it is on *my* end that the problem lies, and only a daily spiritual practice gives me any chance to keep my end of the connection open.

What kind of daily spiritual practice is right for you? There are many to choose from, and I encourage you to *try* several, then choose one or two and stick with it for some time. You may do regular intercessory prayer, Centering Prayer (which several of us do), reading Scripture regularly (possibly using the process of Lectio Divina), meditative walking, spending time in nature (God’s First Bible) and allowing it to soak your spirit, or any other of a myriad of spiritual practices. I’d be glad to speak with any of you and suggest some practices, direct you to others who could teach you spiritual practices, or suggest some books to get you started. My friends, I am convinced that if each one of us were to engage in a daily practice which opened our spirits to be changed by God and didn’t simply reaffirm our egos, these pews would soon be filled to overflowing!

So the first message of today’s Gospel is: Commit to a daily spiritual practice that opens you to be changed by God. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

Fr. John Shea points out that in this passage the word “‘rest’ should not be taken in a conventional sense. It does not mean more time to sleep and play and less time to work. Rest [in this Gospel context means] *Sabbath* rest, learning how to be sustained by the goodness of Creation, a Creation rooted in God. Rest does not mean inactivity but acting in consort with Creation, with the Spirit of the Creator who is already acting. The overall project is to learn how to receive divine energy and nourishment, energy and nourishment that drives mission.” (*Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 184)

But this is not an *easy* lesson to learn. Fr. Shea suggests that it requires nothing less than a change of consciousness, symbolized in our Gospel story by getting into a boat and crossing over -- “over to a new way of thinking . . . On the other shore, in the new consciousness, everything begins with compassion, with noticing and identifying with unmet spiritual needs” – as our Gospel clearly shows. (*ibid.*) Getting into that boat could be likened to engaging in our spiritual practice, which opens us to be changed by God and carries us over to a new way of seeing and thinking.

Now, in listening to our Gospel reading, you may have thought to yourself, “Jesus invites the disciples to rest, but what they get instead is just more people

clamoring for Jesus to teach them and heal them. Instead of *rest*, Jesus and his disciples are drained all the more. Jesus may **talk** about rest, but when push comes to shove, compassion takes over and he just gets more drained.” Yet in a profound insight into this Gospel passage, John Shea suggests that all of the teaching and healing and feeding by Jesus and his disciples *need not* be necessarily draining; in fact, there is a hint in the Gospel text that *compassion is a form of rest*. (*ibid.* p. 185) It all depends, Fr. Shea explains, on whether you place yourself on a *different* level or on the same level as the one you have compassion for. He writes: “When we try to be compassionate from a self-understanding of *difference*, we can quickly become worn out. We view ourselves as in a superior position and the other in a needy position. We are called upon from our greater health or knowledge or expertise to help. In order to help we must understand the person from the inside. The effort entails bringing *our greater* being into *their lesser* being and lifting it up. This is heavy lifting, and too much of it makes us exhausted.

“But compassion can also come from a self-understanding of *sameness*. We can find in ourselves the connecting link with the other. This cannot be manufactured. It must be genuinely perceived. We must refrain from identifying with the ‘edge’ we may have, the possession, attribute, or knowledge that makes **us** a little bit better or luckier. This disidentification is not easy to do. All our life we have been taught to use our *difference* to gain advantage. In fact, we even see our ‘*originality*’ not in closeness to the **Origin** from which all things come but in those aspects of ourselves that no one else shares...” (*ibid.*) Had you ever thought of that? That “originality” means the opposite of claiming a **same** origin? “Compassion from a self-understanding of sameness,” Fr. Shea believes, “is an alternate consciousness.” (*ibid.*, p. 186)

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall argues that it is this very sameness with us that is at the heart of the healing, saving action of Jesus. But we often make the mistake of confusing “compassion” with “pity.” “Pity is something you can manage from afar—at a once-remove!” Dr. Hall writes. “Not compassion... The precondition for compassion is unconditional solidarity with the ones for whom you feel it.

“But here we are at the very center of our faith! Jesus' compassion for the crowd, sheep without a shepherd, is not condescension. It is the mark of his *identification* with his kind...” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost* 1) So deep was God's compassion for his human children that God became the **same** as us.

“When we recognize our *sameness*,” John Shea continues, “our actions come from a space of communion. They are not the willful efforts of a separate being trying to exert influence in the foreign territory of another. They become the coordinated work of united people who are grounded in what ultimately unites

them: a common humanity and a common Source. Compassion is not an *achievement* but the **recognition** of the deeper truth of solidarity. The consciousness of this truth is a restful place from which action flows easily, without pressure and pushing, happening more by itself.” Not draining, but drawing on the energy of our common life in One Spirit.

What would happen in our world today if all people, each and every one created in the image of God, expressed God’s compassion with one another? If, instead of focusing on differences – between our nation and other nations, our race and other races, our religion and other religions, our denomination and others, our social class and that of others, our political party and others’, our music and their music, our worship service and their worship service – what if, instead of focusing on differences, we truly became the compassion of God, and recognized the much deeper truth of solidarity?

It can happen as we open ourselves to be changed into Christ’s compassion through a daily practice of the Presence of God.

AMEN