

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 19, 2009 B

Proper 11

In preparing this sermon, I became aware of how important the practice of "keeping Sabbath" is – and how little time we spend encouraging one another to cultivate this "piece of time that opens space for God," as Dorothy C. Bass describes it in her book Practicing our Faith. Wayne Muller, in his book, Sabbath, describes Sabbath time as more than "the absence of work; it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true. It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honoring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us."

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

In today's gospel, the disciples are regrouping. They were sent by Jesus on a mission, two by two, with clear instructions of what to do on their journey. And off they went. Mark doesn't tell us if they were gone for a few days, or a week or a month. All he tells us is that Jesus sent them off to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. And now, they've returned from their trip eager to share their experiences. Jesus takes a good look at them and sees that underneath the excitement and satisfaction they had in talking about their mission, they were exhausted. He recognized and affirmed their need for rest and renewal. So he says, "Come, let's go to a deserted place to rest a while. Why don't we get in the boat and row ourselves to some solitary place on the beach?" That was 'Plan A' – and it was short-lived.

Mark tells us that the crowd didn't just follow them. They figured out where Jesus and his disciples were headed and got there on foot before them. And so, rather than taking some restful time with his disciples, Jesus, when he saw the crowds that had followed them, "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." And then he switches gears! Jesus moves to 'Plan B' and begins teaching and touching and healing the many who put their trust and hope in him. God's power was visibly manifested through his compassionate presence. And from the writings of Mark, it sounds like it took all day and some of the early evening. Mark paints a picture of a very busy Jesus.

I've had mixed feelings through the years about this passage in Mark, because it got me in trouble. It wasn't the text itself, but the way I interpreted it. For the longest time after first becoming a parish priest, I took this passage very literally. I felt that if Jesus could make himself so readily available to people, so could I. And so I rarely took regular days off and often didn't even take all the vacation time I had available. And it wasn't even that I felt so important. It was my unreal expectations of myself in relationship to others in my role as a minister. This passage in Mark helped me to

justify my workaholic tendencies for the longest time. It took 'burn out' and a good therapist to see myself and this particular passage in a new light.

I had to learn the hard way that you can't give what you don't have. Sooner or later we fall on our face if we depend simply on our own power or resources. Sometimes we have to be on 'empty' long enough to perhaps do something about it. It's what happens to people always on the go, too busy to smell the flowers or at least take time to slow down long enough to appreciate them. There's never time to renew and replenish our inner lives if we don't intentionally make time to do it.

My cell phone, of all things, recently reminded me of what happens when we don't pay attention to the importance of taking time to recharge our inner sources of energy. I was talking with someone when, in the middle of our conversation, it started making the same sound it does when I hit the 'off' switch. I thought it was odd because I charge it every night. So I hit the 'on' switch and it started up only to keep shutting down after each attempt I made to restart it. I was quite surprised when I realized it had run out of power. I faithfully charge it every evening so I couldn't figure out what was the matter. What had happened was that I recently started plugging it into a different electrical socket but didn't realize that the outlet wasn't working. The cell phone had not been connected to a source of power.

I think this is what happens to many of us when we ignore what in Hebrew is called our *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is a word which means 'self' and is often translated as 'soul' - as in "bless the Lord O my soul" (Mandate To Difference, Walter Brueggemann, p. 149). Our souls can often get depleted, and they do. We all need the kind of time necessary to replenish our souls. But it takes more than just finding time for physical rest. Jesus doesn't just encourage his disciples to take some time away. He calls us "to a deserted place all by ourselves" to rest. But it's a different sort of 'resting' than what we might associate with 'chillin out.' Herbert O'Driscoll, in a reflection on this gospel, describes it in this way:

"This rest is different from the escapes we design for ourselves, surrounded by people who are frantically looking for something paradoxically called relaxation but desperately avoiding an encounter with themselves, not to speak of an encounter with God" (The Word Among Us, Year B, Volume 3, p. 59, Herbert O'Driscoll).

It's a powerful insight for our contemporary culture, with much food for thought, because it speaks to that special kind of time we need that 'opens space for God' (Dorothy C. Bass). And that's what Jesus continually did in his life on earth. In the midst of a very busy life of preaching, teaching, healing and touching so many people, Jesus found the deserted places to open himself in prayer to the Father.

What I didn't pay much attention to in my early days as a parish priest was that Jesus wasn't as interested in what his disciples did or how successful they were on their

mission. What mattered to him was whether or not they stayed close to the Shepherd. It's what the boat ride to the deserted place was about. Like the shepherd of Psalm 23, the Lord leads us beside still waters. He restores our nephesh, our souls, if we but take the time to enter the deserted place in our lives – places unique for each of us. I've come to realize in my own need for healing, renewal and transformation that 'burnout' isn't often the result of doing too much or of being overextended. Burnout is really a spiritual disease which has to do with not taking the kind of time that opens us inwardly to the place in our souls where God's Spirit can refresh and renew us. Some years ago I attended a clergy retreat in which I was introduced to a prayer which has become a part of my daily devotions. As a matter of fact, if I ever had to choose between the Peace Prayer of St. Francis, a prayer very dear to my heart, or the CREDO prayer, I'd choose the CREDO prayer because it expresses something of what I'm trying to share this morning which isn't always easy to put into words.

Let us pray:

Holy God, be in my mind that I might let go of all that diminishes the movement of your Spirit within me.

Discerning God, be in my eyes, that I might see You in the midst of all the busyness that fills my life.

Loving God, be in my heart, that I can be open to those I love, to those with whom I share ministry and to the whole human family.

Gracious God, be in that grace-filled silence that lies deep within me, that I might live in Christ as Christ lives in me.

Amen.

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