

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

(11/15/15)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 6:30-44, 53-56

*“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.” (Mk 6:31-32)*

Several streams flowed together this week into the thoughts I would like to share this morning.

The first is a pile of papers submitted by my Assumption College students, a pile that is staring at me from a prominent place on my desk. If I am not to fall behind (and you know how much I hate to fall behind), these papers should be read and graded within a week. The problem is that the 60 papers will take approximately 30 hours to read thoughtfully and grade sensitively, and I don't know where I am going to find that 30 hours.

The second is an experience I had last Wednesday when I took four hours out of the middle of a busy day to attend a meditation session and dharma talk by Thay Pittaya, an ordained Buddhist monk from the Thai Forest Tradition. I discovered that I really liked sitting in silence on my mat for an hour and then listening to someone who simply radiated peace remind me of how much I need to integrate meditation and mindful breathing into my everyday life.

The third was a fantasy that I had while I was driving back to my office from Newton. If my family members ask me what I would like for a Christmas gift this year, I will tell them that I would like to spend a week at the Rose Apple Meditation Center in Vermont. (I would really like to go back to India, Nepal and Tibet, but the chances of them giving me permission let alone the funding to do this are slim.)

The fourth is my realization that all the sermons I preach are about me. They are actually not about me (that would be narcissistic); they are about Jesus. But when I give you advice about how to live a healthy and meaningful life, about how to walk the Christian walk, I am basically talking to myself. If these little pearls of wisdom are also helpful to you, so much the better. The saying “Physician, heal thyself” is not posted in a prominent place next to my computer, but (at my best) it assumes a prominent place in my mind.

When I feel burdened by the demands and time constraints that life places on me (or that I place upon myself), I feel a deep connection with the Jesus who is described in the gospel of Mark.

Mark's depiction of Jesus is different from that conveyed in the Gospel of John. Mark is a gospel of action while John is a gospel of words. Mark presents Jesus as one whose ministry is characterized by a succession of mighty works. Jesus' authority is revealed in what he *does* more than in what he *says*. These mighty works, for all who have eyes to see, are signs of the presence of God's power and kingdom in Jesus.

One of Mark's favorite words is "immediately." This word occurs forty times in the sixteen chapters. From the constant action, it seems like Jesus had precious little "down time." He and his disciples are constantly on the go.

Jesus sends his disciples out to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to call people to repent, and to heal the sick. The disciples return. They report on what they have accomplished and what they have experienced.

Jesus then tells them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while."

Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while. The disciples have been busy. They have been doing good things. They have been helping people in important ways. They have been teaching people about the kingdom of God, healing them of various diseases and driving out demons. But they have apparently not been taking care of themselves. They have not even taken the time to eat. I suspect they also have not set aside time to pray.

Jesus knows that the disciples are fired with enthusiasm for the mission that he has entrusted to them. They want to do what he asks of them, and they want to do it well. They may even want to do it perfectly. But they are just human beings. They can only do so much. When they try to do more than can realistically be expected, they run the risk of burnout.

The symptoms of burnout are easy to identify--from the outside. It is far more difficult for the person approaching burnout to realize what is happening. This is because burnout happens incrementally. It is also because most of us who experience burnout are deeply committed to the tasks that fill our day. More often than not, these tasks are a labor of love. We don't want to entertain the possibility that we cannot accomplish what we would like to

accomplish, or that we cannot do it in the way we originally envisioned. It is difficult for us to ask for help. It is even difficult for us to accept help when it is freely offered.

People who experience burnout become depressed, though they may not realize it. They lose a sense of joy. They lose hope for the future. They complain a lot. They begin to have psychosomatic problems. They pick fights or are easily annoyed. They lose emotional flexibility in dealing with relationships. They lose cognitive flexibility in dealing with complex situations. They begin to think of what they are doing as work instead of care or ministry. When this happens, everyone loses.

Jesus calls his disciples to step back from the needs of the world and take care of themselves. He calls them to step back from the people who are pressing in on them. He calls them to experience the psychological and spiritual renewal of Sabbath.

Jesus and his disciples leave the crowds and head off to a lonely place. However, the crowds see them going. The crowds are not sensitive to the disciples' need for a break. They are too caught up in their own problems, their own needs to be concerned for the mental health of those that are serving as caretakers. Perhaps you have had this experience. If you leave it up to those for whom you care to monitor your mental status, to recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout, to ensure you are taking care of yourself as well as them, you will have a long wait. You have to take care of yourself!

The people's need is great, although it is possible that they only perceive it as great. They appear as selfish. They do not feel the need to take care of Jesus or his disciples. They not only follow the little band that is heading off on retreat; they race ahead and are waiting for them when they arrive.

When I read this passage of scripture, I think about years of coming in the door at the end of a long day. I feel tired, drained. My wife, children, and dogs are all lined up waiting for me, happy to see me. But they all want something. They clamor for attention, sometimes even compete for attention, wanting to share their day with me, wanting help with some problem or situation. I think, "Can't you just let me take off my coat? Can't I just get a glass of wine?"

Jesus is more understanding than I am. He is more compassionate. He is more patient. He knows the people are like hungry sheep. So he feeds them. He heals them. He lets them touch him. He does not become impatient, discouraged, depressed, or angry. It is interesting,

however, that the Jesus presented in the 1960's rock opera "Jesus Christ, Superstar" feels worn down and overwhelmed by the seemingly endless demands that are made on him. At one point he screams at the crowd "Heal yourself!" He also allows Mary Magdalene to minister to him, a precursor of this special relationship many years before Dan Brown's suggestive novel.

I don't think we should compare ourselves with Jesus. After all, Jesus was Jesus. It would be more realistic for us to compare ourselves with his disciples. Jesus is wise. He knows human beings. He knows human nature. He does not *suggest* to his disciples that they take care of themselves; he *commands* them to do so.

Jesus sends his disciples into the world to minister, to minister to the needs of the world. They are to act on his behalf, to function as God's hands in the world that God is creating. They are to feed the sheep, to find the lost, to heal those who have been broken by life. They are to do this not halfheartedly, but wholeheartedly. They are to give, taking nothing in return.

Yet Jesus knows they are human. This is because Jesus is human. If the sentiment expressed in "Jesus Christ, Superstar" is correct, then even Jesus can be worn down by the needs and demands of the crowd. He can become tired. He may even become discouraged. Jesus realizes his disciples have limitations, just as he does. Because of their commitment, their zeal for the kingdom of God, they are in special danger of burning out.

Jesus, however, is a good therapist. He knows how to prevent burnout, and he knows how to cure it when it happens. He tells the disciples they need to practice self-care. They need to restore the lost balance in their lives. They need to balance work with recreation, extraversion with creative introversion, time spent with others with time alone.

We are like the disciples. We may not be driving out demons or healing the sick, but we are involved in ministry just the same. We may be feeding people literally or emotionally. We may be caring for the seemingly endless needs of children, an ailing spouse, or elderly parents. This is in addition to the demands of our work and the time we give to our church. Jesus' message is directed to young mothers or fathers, to those who are in the "sandwich generation," and to people caring for a spouse whose health or mind is failing. He is speaking to those of us in medicine, in education, in psychology, in ministry. Jesus' message is addressed to all of us.

Jesus calls us to rest. He calls us to return to what feeds us. He calls us to return to what refreshes us. He calls us to return to what restores us. If we do not do this, we will burn out

without even knowing it. When we do, everyone loses. When we don't take care of ourselves, a labor of love becomes a burden that we curse.

There are several places in the gospel of Mark where we read of Jesus stepping aside from his ministry of teaching and healing to nourish his soul with prayer. For example, in Mark 1:35, immediately following the calling of the first disciples, the healing of the man with an unclean spirit, and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, we read,

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."*

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus restores himself by going to a deserted place to pray. However, his disciples hunt him down. He gets precious little time for himself.

Note that when Jesus goes off by himself to pray, he does not go to his "happy place" but to his "quiet place." He goes off into the wilderness. Since he uses this time for prayer, I suspect it is also a time when he receives instruction and guidance from God.

Jesus calls his disciples and us to experience the rhythm of Sabbath, to balance our active life with a time of refreshing. We should do this not only when we observe the Sabbath in church; we should instill this rhythm in our everyday life. We need to build in what feeds us as individuals, whether it is listening to music, talking with friends, or exercising. We also need to build in what we need as Christians, what we need to nourish our spiritual life.

Many of us work hard. We take what we do seriously, whether it is parenting, caring for a spouse, caring for our parents, or our job. We mean well, though sometimes we don't know when to stop. Unfortunately the brakes are often applied through a heart attack, through an illness, through depression, or as we inflict the symptoms of burnout on those we love.

Jesus reminds us not to be inflated. We are not called to save the world. We are only called to do our part. God is the major actor. Like the disciples, we are secondary or tertiary helpers at best. The destiny of our loved ones is not in our hands; it is in God's hands.

When I complain that I am too busy to set aside time to pray and meditate, I am reminded that the Dalai Lama begins each day with four hours of meditation. I am busy, but this guy has even more responsibilities than I. He would not think of starting his day in any other way. It is from this time in meditation, when he opens himself to the inner light, that he draws the strength and wisdom to do all that he does during the day and to do it so well.

We are disciples. We come to church to learn about God, about Jesus, and about ourselves. We come to find direction for our lives. But we also come to “get our batteries recharged.” We come to experience Sabbath, to experience the rest that refreshes and restores us. Note that I did not say that we come to church to sleep, though this is what some people apparently need. As soon as they sit quietly for ten or fifteen minutes, they are out like a light!

Whoever we are and whatever burdens we carry, we need to recharge our batteries. We need to experience what the Bible calls “times of refreshing.” For an introvert like me, that may mean time alone. For an extravert, it may mean time spent with friends. But more than just “down time,” Jesus calls his disciples and us to turn to God for the hope, the courage, the strength, and the wisdom we need to do God’s will in the world and in our lives.

It is in this spirit that we gather together in this sanctuary. We come acknowledging our need to be fed with the bread of life, to be nourished by the presence of our Lord both within and among us. Then, as we leave this very special fellowship, we need to remember the charge that Jesus gave to his disciples and which he also gives to us: “Take care of yourself.”

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
November 15, 2015*