

YOU NEED TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF!

(09/18/2022)

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)

This morning we are continuing our exploration of the gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God as revealed in our Lord, Jesus Christ, and as recorded in the Gospel of Mark.

As we noted briefly last week, 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 more in what he *does* 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. The people sense that God is with Jesus in a very powerful way!

Also, as we have noted, one of Mark’s favorite words is “immediately.” This word occurs forty times in sixteen chapters. From the constant action, it seems like Jesus had precious little “down time.” He and his disciples are constantly on the go!

Perhaps Jesus had a sense that his time on earth was limited. As recorded in the synoptic gospels, one could make a case that the length of Jesus’ ministry was only a single year. In the Gospel of John, it seems to have lasted as much as three years. In either case, there was not a lot of time for Jesus to do what he felt God called him to do. The short length of Jesus’ ministry confirms our belief that something special happened or incarnated in Jesus; he accomplished more in one year, perhaps three, than the church that was founded in his name has accomplished in two thousand years! We are still trying to understand and live out his extraordinary message!

As we just heard, Jesus has sent his disciples out on their mission to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to call people to repent, and to heal the sick. They return. They report on what they have accomplished and what they have experienced.

Jesus 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 or experiencing burnout to realize what is happening. This is because burnout happens incrementally. It is also because many of us who experience burnout are deeply committed to the task that we have undertaken. Very often, this task, this heavy burden, is a labor of love. It is something to which we are committed. We don't want to entertain the possibility that we cannot do it, 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 lose a sense of humor. 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 are unable to look at themselves through the eyes of others. They are easily angered, quick to take offense. 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 time of refreshing. They are too caught up in their own problems, their own needs, to be concerned for the feelings, for the mental health of those that are serving as healers, teachers, or 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 need 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 self-centered, 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. In particular, I remember those years when I had a full-time mental hospital chaplaincy and a half-time interim position in a church while I was studying for my doctorate at Boston University. I enter the house feeling tired, drained. My wife, children, and dogs, all of whom I love, are lined up waiting for me, happy to see me. But they all want something! They are clamoring for attention, sometimes even competing 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 you let me change my clothes? 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 sees the people are like hungry sheep. 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 as presented in the 1960’s rock opera “Jesus Christ, Superstar” Jesus becomes worn down by the seemingly endless demands that are made on him. At one point, totally overwhelmed, 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! Then again, Jesus was human, just like us. Even so, 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, as I believe it is, even Jesus could be worn down by the needs and demands of the crowd. He, like us, could become tired. He may even have 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 danger of burning out.

Fortunately, Jesus is a good therapist! He knows how to prevent burnout. 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 re-creation, 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 often in addition to the demands of our work, our professional responsibilities, 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 social work, in medicine, in education, in psychology, in human services, 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 calling his disciples to withdraw from the crowds, to step aside, to go on a mini retreat. 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!

Time and again Jesus goes apart to pray. Note that he goes, not 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, when he receives direction from God. We need to remember that the wilderness to which Jesus went following his baptism and to which goes from time to time in his ministry is not necessarily an external wilderness; it is a place inside us, a place to which we can return when the demands of civilization become too much to bear. We also need to remember that, as recorded in our scriptures, the wilderness was often the place where people encountered God or were encountered by God.

Jesus calls us to experience the rhythm of Sabbath, to balance our busyness and ceaseless activity with a time of refreshing. We should not only do this once a week 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, reading, praying, meditating, doing yoga, 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. I work hard—especially for someone my age: as of this past week I am now officially at least a third of the way through life. We take what we do seriously, whether it is parenting, caring for a spouse, 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, our nation, our children, our spouse, or our elderly parents. We are only called to do our part. God is the major actor! Like the disciples, we are secondary or tertiary helpers. The destiny of the world, our nation, even 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 know 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 his time in meditation, his time in the wilderness, a time set aside to center himself, to open himself to the inner light, that he draws the strength and wisdom to do all he does during the day.

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!

By the way, let me say that it never bothers me when parishioners doze off during my sermons! I figure you must need to sleep, and if my sermon lulls you off like a lullaby, so much the better—as long as you don't snore! Sleep, good, refreshing sleep, including naps (my favorite) are one of our “times of refreshing,” one of the times when we are taking care of ourselves.

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.

In this spirit we gather in this sanctuary on this precious sabbath day to take care of ourselves, to recharge our batteries, to deepen our relationship with that God who has called us into being, who lives in and through us, and who calls us to help incarnate the kingdom of God on earth. In the busyness of our lives, we need to remember the charge that Jesus gave to his disciples, a charge that he also gives to us: “Take care of yourself.”

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