

Labor & Rest: A Balancing Act

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How would you respond if someone were to ask, "How's your summer going?" I'd venture to guess that most of us would *not* respond: "I have done nothing but rest. Everything has been so calm and slow, and I feel completely relaxed and refreshed." Yes, that's called fantasy fiction. Chances are good that most of us don't get enough rest, and I'm not just talking about the amount of sleep we get.

Webster's Dictionary defines 'rest' as "**freedom from activity or labor, to refrain from exertion**", or "**to be free from anxiety or disturbance**." So, now let me ask you this way: How often lately have you been free from all activity or labor or exertion? How often lately have you been free from anxiety or disturbance?

If you're like most folks I know, you may not even remember the last time you felt fully rested. The pace of life for most of us is stuck in high gear, and that's just as true for most of the retired folks I know. Yet, don't we all desperately crave a few moments of peace and quiet, of genuine rest and renewal?

Well, we're in good company. For we learn in today's Gospel reading from Mark 6 that even Jesus and the disciples needed some 'down-time.' Jesus tells his tired, hard-working disciples to "**come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while**" (Mark 6:31). Some of you may remember that was the theme of our all-church retreat at Camp Loughridge nine years ago, back in 2009. But what usually happens? Often, just like in this biblical story, when we finally *do* convince ourselves that we must get away and find some rest, **the demands and interruptions in life seem to follow us nevertheless**. Back a few weeks ago on the first Sunday in July, I preached on the story in Mark 5 of Jesus being interrupted by a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. As a result of his pausing to initiate a conversation and relationship with the woman, the young daughter of Jairus, a leader in the local synagogue, died. Though Jesus heals them both, we explored what it would look like in our own lives if we approached interruptions in our daily routines as possible moments of grace, of seeing interruptions as part of our work and ministry. So, how's that going for you?

In today's story, we learn the disciples have just returned after Jesus sent them out in pairs to the surrounding countryside in Galilee to heal and teach and spread the good news. Upon their return, Jesus asks them to share how things went and what they taught. We call that mission interpretation. Jesus' pastoral response, like a good shepherd, is to call them away to get some rest, because he knew they were tired and had been too busy to even eat. **God also knows when we are tired and in need of rest**. Added to that, the disciples were distraught because they had just learned of the beheading of John the Baptist, the story we looked at last Sunday. So, they also needed time to deal with their grief. **God also knows when we need time to work through our grief**.

Yet, after they all get in a boat and depart to a deserted place to rest they see a large crowd following them along the shore. And **in one of the most theologically important verses in the Bible** we are told that, "as Jesus 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" (Mark 6:34). **As Christians, as those who see the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus as the definitive revelation of the nature and character of God, we learn that "compassion must be said to be of the essence of the One who created us and before whom all life is lived"** (Douglass John Hall, *Feasting on the Word*). It is God's compassion for us, and our resulting compassion for others that motivates us into deeds of service for those in need. As it turns out, this biblical story moves directly from compassion to the feeding of the 5000.

So, what's the answer? To put it most simply, **we must learn to balance labor and rest. A healthy body, mind, and spirit requires balancing your daily work and compassionate service to others with a the very real experience of rest and renewal.** Our own John Calvin (who helped invent the 'Protestant work ethic') wrote, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing."

This is where the church can help. For church should be so much more than just one more activity that fills our modern lives. Biblical commentator Karen Marie Yust (from *Feasting on the Word*) suggests, "If the church today is unrecognizable as a **place of healing**, then we need to reflect on what our mission and purpose in the world are and how we communicate the good news of God's healing grace in this time and place." She understands the need to find this necessary balance in life when she goes on to state, "Just as persons come to the church in need of God's grace, the faith community engages in ministry because it needs to live as Christ has commanded, as the body of Christ sent into the world to help God repair the brokenness caused by sin."

So, how do we accomplish this? Lynne Baab, in a web post entitled *Gathering Voices* (blog.thethoughtfulchristian.com), **describes a healthy congregation as what she calls a "holding environment" – as in how a mother holds her child.** She says that a holding environment is one that creates a safe and reliable physical space, fosters emotional growth, is secure but adaptive, exhibits care, honesty, and trust, and provides calming emotional support. In such an environment a congregation like College Hill can nurture relationships in which we understand, at one level, we belong to each other and therefore are responsible to care for and about each other.

As a holding environment, a congregation like ours will also enable you to experience God as the One Who Holds. When we are that kind of community of faith we become a place where people gather not simply out of sense of duty and responsibility (two defining characteristics of most Presbyterians), but also because we can find some rest and renewal – even as we are then filled with the compassion that is necessary to engage in loving service to others. Instead of simply one more thing to do on our list of weekly activities, let the church function as an alternative to the rapid pace of your daily life experience. Taking this hour or so to pause each week – through music, prayer, scripture, sermon, fellowship, and more music – should nurture our faith, help us re-center our lives, and hopefully bring a bit of peace and serenity back into our hectic everyday lives.

Remember this biblical story. **For when Jesus saw that his disciples had been running as fast as they could, he did not say, "Run faster!" He said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." God gives us permission to do just that. Give yourself permission to do just that.** And I will try to practice what I preach.

Yet, also remember **the purpose of rest and renewal is to have the strength, energy, and desire to reach out in compassion to others in need.** For you, that may mean this coming week compassion for a complete stranger, someone at work,

someone at home, a person sitting on a pew near to you this morning, perhaps even compassion for yourself. **Finding a balance between labor and rest can, in fact, help you and I to live and be the persons God has created us to be.**

And if someone were indeed to ask, "How's your summer going?" it might not be fantasy fiction to say that you've been able to find a little rest. Pay attention to how you are doing in this crucial balancing act.

Amen.