

Prioritizing Rest and Renewal

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

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Today's Gospel reading from Mark 6 reflects an all-too-common experience in each of our lives. **The disciples are tired and weary and desperately in need of rest. And yet, when they encounter people in need their compassion calls them back into action.** This represents two sides of the same coin of faithful discipleship in following the ways and teachings of Jesus. That coin reflects how **we must balance our labor with our need to rest. And not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually, as well.**

Chances are we are out of balance, not giving ourselves permission or the opportunities needed to get the rest we so desperately need. And I'm not just talking about the amount of sleep we get each night. It starts by **getting the idea out of our head that taking time for rest and renewal, time for ourselves and self-care, is somehow connected with being selfish lazy. It's not**

The Bible takes the issue of rest very seriously. In the creation story, God rested. The Fourth Commandment directs us to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. That means to intentionally set aside time to rest from our labor. Paraphrasing Ecclesiastes 3: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to work, and a time to refrain from working. A time for exertion, and a time for rest. Time and time again we learn that a healthy life – physically, mentally, and spiritually – always involves the need to **find ways to balance any number of priorities in our lives.**

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declares, **"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest"** (Matt. 11:28). In today's Gospel Reading from Mark 6, Jesus tells his weary disciples, **"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while"** (Mark 6:31). I've preached many sermons over the years using those two passages of scripture to encourage us to find that necessary balance. And yes, I will keep preaching this message because it's obviously one of which most of us need to be reminded time and time again.

Let me ask, **at this very point in your life are you weary?** Could you use some rest and renewal from your weariness? **Weary** can be defined as, "exhausted in strength, endurance, vigor, or freshness; having one's patience, tolerance, or pleasure exhausted." **Rest** can be defined as "freedom from activity or labor, to refrain from exertion, to be free from anxiety or disturbance." So, let me ask again, are you currently feeling, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually exhausted? How free are you from over-exertion and anxiety? You may even be having a hard time remembering the last time you felt fully rested and renewed.

Well, we're in good company. As previously mentioned, even Jesus and the disciples needed some much-needed down time. 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. They had been working hard and running at a fast pace. As the gospel writer describes it, they were so busy in their coming and going that they couldn't even find time eat. Some of you may

be able to relate to that. **So what did Jesus do? He didn't tell them to buck up and run faster.** Instead, upon their return, **Jesus first asks them to share how things went and what they taught.** He sat them down and listened to them. **That's a good practice for us, to listen to those who are weary, even if we are weary ourselves.**

This is when Jesus tells his tired, hard-working disciples to "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). There's a good lesson there for us. **God knows when we are tired, exhausted, perhaps even burned out and in need of rest and renewal.** Several years ago *Sojourners Magazine* had an article by Jewish Rabbi Arthur Waskow entitled, "Radical Shabbat: Free Time, Free People." It is subtitled, "Honoring work and restful renewal are both aspects of responsibility." He reflects how most Americans today have less time to raise children, share neighborhood concerns, or develop our spiritual life. The rabbi asks, "Why is this happening?" And he answers, "Because **doing, making, profiting, producing, and consuming have been elevated to idols.**" **The biblical concept of rest, known as sabbath, is a critique of these idolatries.**

Our engrained Protestant work ethic reminds us of the importance of doing, working, and making things. It's just that a society that never pauses has a hard time affirming community, relationships, family, as well as physical, spiritual and mental health. Your presence here today, whether in person or online, affirms your recognition of the need to pause from the routines of life, to find balance through worship and fellowship in this community of faith.

Where else do you find refuge and sanctuary? It could be at a particular place. During seminary, mine was on a bench under a giant oak tree. Or, it could be doing a particular thing, or simply a place in your mind where you can retreat. It is helpful to recognize, therefore, that **Jesus encourages the disciples – including us – to care for themselves.** We are no different from those disciples when it comes to our need for rest and renewal. **Jesus gives us permission to take care of ourselves, to be more intentional about self-care!** I often use a phrase concerning the needed reminder for the caregiver to care for themselves. Jesus gives all of us the permission we need to do just that.

There's a good resource that can help us with all this. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) released a paper back in 2000 entitled, "An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift." Twenty-four years, now, after this paper was written and distributed, see if the following excerpts don't ring true for you today, and perhaps for us as a congregation:

For some, the need for Sabbath emerges as a cry from within. Exhausted, we yearn over the loss of time to rejoice in those closest to us, or simply to play, to rest and be still, to delight in the goodness that we believe yet surrounds us.

For some, the need for Sabbath names itself in quiet grief. Grief that we are moving faster and faster in our lives, but the only progress we seem to make is into a greater emptiness. Grief that the ways we have strained so conscientiously to live are simply not working. Grief that although we partake abundantly from the table our culture spreads before us, we come away from the table still hungry, as hurried and pressed as ever rather than nourished and renewed.

Referring to the commandment to keep the Sabbath, our own John Calvin (who helped invent the 'Protestant work ethic' 500 years ago) declares that *sabbath*, the

need for rest from our weariness, reflects God's genuine concern for God's people. **Calvin writes, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing."** And as that General Assembly report states, "And so Sabbath invites us to rest and **take joy in what already is**, even as God rested on the seventh day and rejoiced in all the goodness of creation." Focus, then, on being grateful for what already is.

That report, just as relevant today as when it was first written, also recognizes what often happens in our corporate church life. It states, "**At all levels of our denomination, persons struggle with exhaustion.**" Then it asks, "**What patterns of drivenness do we need to let go of in our congregations?** What forms of true spiritual rest do we need to embrace?" I continue to read articles on the state of people in our nation suffering from what can be described as **systemic weariness**.

Here's something else to take note. **Much like the outcome of this biblical story today, well-made plans for rest are often interrupted by the need (or at least our perceived need) to continue to compassionately look after the people and things to which we have been entrusted.** As your pastor, and I say this while also looking into a mirror, I can recognize, honor, and support the varied needs you may have for rest, for sabbath, in these divisive and turbulent times. But whatever we face in the future, both individually and as a community of faith, let us remember to **give ourselves permission to seek needed balance in our lives, especially the balance between our labor and our rest. For yes, rest and renewal must be a priority!**

Amen.

Resources:

Rev. Teri McDowell Ott, "Anyone else experiencing 'The Great Resignation' in your church?", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, July 18, 2021.