

At the shore with Jesus

The Rev. Dr. Stephen L. White
Grace Church,
Great Barrington, Massachusetts
July 22, 20018

I think the gospel (Mark 6:30-34, 53-56) we just heard is the quintessential summer sermon. First of all it is from Mark's gospel and Mark famously does everything very succinctly with no fancy talk. Who doesn't like a brief gospel during the summer?

Second, it's about Jesus and his close followers taking a vacation. At the shore, no less! And they even have a boat ride!

Remember that two weeks ago Jesus sent these very same disciples out two by two to proclaim the good news of God's work in the world. He told them not to take anything with them and he told them to keep moving. We're told that they did many acts of healing in the name of God and you have to assume that when word got around about that, that there were crowds. And Jesus didn't just send them off and go back to sit by the pool in the backyard. He moved off from Nazareth to the area around the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee because he wasn't getting much traction in his hometown. The gospel says "...he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief."

So he went to Capernaum thirty miles away. And he didn't take the bus; he walked the dusty roads. It's about 30 miles — like from here to Williamstown — and it's over the Arbel mountain range. So Jesus and the disciples must have been exhausted by the time they all met up again at the lake shore. They needed a vacation.

We can relate to that, right? We work hard without a break for a long period of time, and especially if our work involves dealing with lots of people we need a break. Jesus at various times throughout the gospels makes it pretty clear that his ministry, and by extension, our ministry following his example, is not possible without a firm foundation in prayer and reflection, an interior spiritual life. And to do that we need a break from the routine. Christian ministry is not the same as social work. Christian ministry comes from a place deep within us where we are somehow aware of our connection to a loving God. And that connection impels us to love others as God loves us and animates our good works for others. So feeding the hungry and caring for the sick and giving hospitality to the stranger flow naturally from our love of God. That's how ministry is different from social work or humanitarian work. You don't have to love God or know God to be a social worker or a humanitarian.

So, according to Mark, Jesus 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."

I think of this episode as the kind of comic scene you'd see in a Monty Python movie. Jesus and the disciples are trying to get away for a break. They make a dash for a boat tied up at the shore and they sail off. You can imagine the relief they all felt when they were in the boat pulling away from the shore. At last! A break from the crowds!

But back on the shore somebody makes an educated guess at where they're going and says, "Hey, I'll bet they're going over to Geneserret. It's peaceful over there and Jesus goes there all the time. Let's go!"

So they all run off to the west to Geneserret and they get there before the boat gets there. So imagine the scene as the boat approaches the shore and Jesus and his closest disciples, expecting to get a break, see a crowd there. Can't you just see Peter smacking his forehead with his palm and crying "Oh no! There goes our holiday!"

And can't you imagine Jesus patting his shoulder and saying, "Never mind, Pete. We had a nice boat ride, didn't we? Let's go see what we can do for these nice people."

I don't know if you noticed it in the gospel, but there seems to me to be a fascinating juxtaposition between frenetic activity and the need for rest, between order and chaos, between self-care and care of others.

As Mark describes the move that Jesus and the disciples make to break away for a brief rest, he uses the phrase "deserted place" three times within a few sentences. I think this is to stress the desperate need they had for rest and relaxation. They were doing intense spiritual work and you can't keep doing that without some spiritual refreshment for yourself. So they went to what they thought was a deserted place, but the joke was on them because the crowds got there before they did!

If you or I were the disciples in that boat and seeing the crowd on the shore after weeks of grueling work and exhausting foot travel, we might have been frustrated and impatient, and justifiably so. But Jesus wasn't frustrated. The gospel says, Jesus "...had compassion for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd."

Years ago I worked for a while as an administrator of the psychiatric wing of a large general hospital. We had a 40 inpatient beds and a busy outpatient clinic, and other services for psychiatric patients. I worked 60 hour weeks and never seemed to get ahead of any of the many tasks I had. It seemed that every time I tried to get something done there would be some crisis to deal with. The interruptions were constant and very frustrating. I used to joke about it saying "This would be a great job if it weren't for the patients and the staff." When I said this to a wise colleague he smiled and said, "Well, you know, our interruptions are our work." I think that might be a good motto for Christian ministry.

So, it might be better for us to shift our focus away from the perspective of Jesus and his friends in the boat and try to see this story from perspective of the people gathered on the shore. We can imagine them shouting "There he is! That's Jesus in the boat!" and "Look, the boat is headed right for us!" And then we can imagine someone saying, "You know, those guys looked pretty tired when they left Capernaum an hour ago. I'll bet they would like to be left alone to rest."

From the point of view of the crowd we see Jesus as he is to us today. Available. Willing to hear us. Concerned for us and wanting to comfort us in our deepest distress. Few of us can handle distractions and interruptions gracefully, and few of us have unlimited energy to be available to help others anytime anywhere. But Jesus is right there, full of care and compassion. Ready, willing, and able to drop everything for us.

When Jesus saw in that crowd a flock of sheep without a shepherd he knew they were his sheep and he was their shepherd. Sheep can look kind of goofy when you see them up close. All running around, darting here and there, looking confused and aimless. I think Jesus saw that in some of those people in the crowd — people who were

confused about their lives, frantic about what to do about some crisis confronting them, desperate for healing for some physical or spiritual malady. People, in other words, just like you and me. People in need of someone or something to bring order into chaotic lives. Someone to bring peace and calm when we're at our wit's end. That's what Jesus did for those people standing on the shore and that's what he does for us now.

The second part of today's gospel reading describes a scene painted in broad strokes. We don't hear about any specific individuals being healed or any particular people with whom Jesus has an encounter. Instead we hear of throngs of frantic people trying to get their loved ones healed. The narrative moves along at a fast pace giving the impression of a tremendous amount of activity by Jesus and his disciples. The contrast between this scene and one we heard a couple of weeks ago when Jesus was in Nazareth is quite striking. Back in Nazareth we are told that Jesus "could do no deed of power" because people saw him as an upstart son of the local carpenter. But here at Geneserret there's no limit to what he can do.

But the Jesus we met in Nazareth is the same Jesus we meet in Geneserret. He hasn't changed. It's the crowd that has changed. It's the difference between a lack of faith and believing, between a closed mind and one that is open to the possibility — the possibility — that God is alive and working in this world for our good.

We tire and grow weary, but Jesus never does. When our burdens seem too heavy to bear we have Jesus to turn to and he is always there, always available without an appointment, always ready to listen to our cries for help.

I don't have to tell you that we live in perilous times. Our country and the world are in a mess the likes of which has not been seen for a couple of generations. And some of us find our private lives in a similar mess that makes us feel hopeless and helpless. There seems to be chaos and turmoil everywhere we look. Yet, yet Jesus remains the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Ready to hear us, ready to help us when we turn to him, ready to help us bear our burdens.

Let us pray.

We give thanks to you, O Jesus,
even for this terrible time,
but only because we trust that you are in it with us,
working for the good of us all,
and sanctifying to us our deepest distress.
Amen.