

Proper 11

July 12, 2015

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

*“O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (BCP)*

How do you find balance in your life? What are the keys to happiness and a godly sense of fulfillment? I guess if I asked several of you individually, I might get a range of answers and non-answers, maybe even an eye roll or two. But I do think it is a good question to ask ourselves. We have many competing demands on our time and energy and it is important for us to have a compass, a North Star, to guide us in how we live.

For us as Christians, our North Star and compass is Jesus Christ. The example of his life that we read about in the Gospels and the grace that we receive from prayer, sacraments, and our life together; all these means of grace help us find our way to a balanced and happy, fulfilled and godly life.

In the verses of the Gospel we heard this morning, we find that Jesus had to sort through issues of work life balance, too. That makes me feel better. In the prior chapter, Jesus had just delegated some of his growing ministry to his closest disciples. They went on the first mission trip and in the opening scene that we just heard read, the disciples came back to report on all the wonderful things God had done through their ministry. Heady stuff! They were on that “high” that we often hear people describe after a mission trip.

But Jesus, of course, was wise. He understood the need for balance, so his first words to them were, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Jesus knew that real and regular rest was important for effective and sustainable ministry. Jesus got it and he demonstrated his understanding at different points in the Gospels when he would get away by himself to pray.

Then an awkward thing happened to Jesus and his followers—they were followed by people in great need. The crowd did not get the memo that said that Jesus and his co-workers were going to take time off for a retreat. Frankly, they probably would not have heeded it if they had gotten the memo! These were folks who were desperate, people who knew their need and were not ashamed to seek hard after what they needed so desperately. Jesus described them as “like sheep without a shepherd.” He was not being patronizing when he said it; he was diagnosing the people who were coming to him. They were lost and hapless.

Now Jesus had at least two responses he could have made when he saw the crowds swarming near the shore: he could have thrown his hands up, harrumphed, and told his disciples “Just keep

sailing because we all need a break.” Or Jesus could have come ashore with his co-workers and done something. Well, we know what Jesus did. He waded on to shore and began to teach them. I wonder what he focused on first. Perhaps he talked about the need for them to find rest for their souls...

The way Jesus responded does raise questions for us, though; especially those of us in the caring professions, like teachers and nurses and doctors and clergy and therapists; and also those of us in demanding family roles, such as parents with young children, or grandparents helping out, or adults taking care of elderly parents or a spouse with a debilitating illness. How do we balance our very demanding lives in those very important roles? When do we keep giving and when do we stop before our giving becomes toxic to the people we love-- and to ourselves?

For me as a priest, I know I have a demanding job. For some of you, too, I know you feel the wear and tear of demanding responsibilities. What we do as moms and teachers and nurses and clergy and caregivers is important and satisfying work that needs to be done in our world. Like Jesus, we come ashore and see the lost sheep and we know we need to pitch in and help. But that's not all. Like Jesus, we also need to know when to withdraw and stay away for a while so that we can carry on.

That's what Jesus did in the intervening verses that we did not read today. He fed 5,000 people <<smh>> and then Jesus dismissed his disciples to go ahead without him (he would walk on water later!) and then we hear that Jesus “went up on the mountain to pray.” He got away. He prayed. He went out into nature. He was by himself where no one, no matter how lost or in need, could reach him (as an aside, it is interesting that God decided to become human BEFORE there were cell phones).

That is the story of Jesus, our exemplar and source of grace. He remained available to his people and to those in need even past the point of when he knew he needed a break and his co-workers needed a break. He could push through his comfort zone. That is the grace we are able to call on as caregivers. But even for Jesus, the flow of grace was not abused to the point where the caregiver became just an empty conduit, providing grace but not absorbing any of it for his own thirst.

So for all of us, we need to learn from Jesus. If you are good at taking breaks and taking care of yourself, congratulations! For you, you may need to pray and pay attention and look to stretch yourself beyond what you are doing now. It is okay to become tired, good tired, and uncomfortable.

And if you are getting near your capacity in doing for others, realize that! Develop self-awareness. Pray for wisdom. Or if that is not working for you, take time to be with people you trust who can help you see what you are doing to yourself and even what you are doing to others, including the people you care for. The cost to the caregiver is often obvious—exhaustion, resentment, guilt, and frustration, to name some of the top emotions exhausted caregivers express.

Surprisingly, there are other consequences when there is an over-taxed caregiver in our midst. For example, there are usually some people who are under used in the ministry they want to offer the world. These folks may come alongside an overworked person and offer help only to be dismissed. The caregiver may say something like, “I got this—thanks anyway.” Or “I am sorry, but my care

recipient only wants me; I have to do this work.” You keep at it and a perfectly good potential helper wanders off looking for someone else to help. It is a missed opportunity for both of you!

A perhaps unexpected consequence is for the care recipient. Now there are exceptions to what I am about to say, so let me acknowledge that up front. But often, care recipients need a break, too. Like Jesus, and like their caregiver, the care recipient may need time alone. They may need a different person to help them, perhaps someone who is less personally connected. That other person may be less susceptible to having their buttons pushed by the care recipient and therefore can give better ministry in some ways. Perhaps even give a compassionate kick in the pants to get the care recipient to take more responsibility for their actions. That is the type of compassion that Jesus would often give. Even when he healed the paralytic man, Jesus also told him to “pick up your mat and walk.” He did not say, “Here let me take that for you.”

Compassion is one of the key characteristics of followers of Jesus Christ. Compassion calls us and compels us, even when we are trying to get away. That comes with following our Lord and his way of life. But if we follow Jesus, we need to remember that he pursued rest and renewal, too. Like it was for Jesus, finding rest may be challenging, especially if we are an active caregiver—perhaps it will need to be late at night or early in the morning. But for Jesus, getting rest and renewal was essential if he was going to continue to be a man of compassion. For us who follow Jesus, we must remember to rest as well.

So this week, let’s try to do these three things as the opportunities arise:

1. If you are under your compassion quota, say yes to at least one need for compassion, even if you do not feel like it. Just do it once (more if you can). Then appreciate how compassionate people do that type of work non-stop all day. And then go say thank you to a nurse or a mom with young kids or a daycare worker. Give them a hug if it is okay with them. Or buy them coffee. // And if you are doing far too much already, then say “Yes” to at least one offer of help from someone else. You can do it!
2. Find time to rest and renew your soul. This can be a proactive, regular practice for you or it may be an urgent need based on the pace of your life now. Get up early, stay up late, wait for all the care recipients to be in bed, and then be still. Light a candle. Read out loud and slowly your favorite psalm. Say the Lord’s Prayer as if you are hearing it for the first time. Be still. Rest.
3. Find a crowd and have fun. Go to a Little League ballgame. Walk in a busy park. Be with those wandering sheep that Jesus saw and pay attention to them. There’s no telling what you may find and what act of compassion you may be called to do; or what time of renewal you may discover.

God wants us to rest up and pray and play and have fun so we are ready for those harder tasks of compassion that God will call us to do.

Let us pray:

“O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”