



"Time for Rest"

Scripture – Mark 6:30-32

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, July 18, 2021

Wouldn't you love to know what grade the disciples received on their first assignment? They had traipsed from village to village with Jesus as he infused people with joy and sparked their hopes. The disciples hovered nearby when he lit up lives with his profound wisdom and dazzling healing touch. They gazed over his shoulder when he reached out with compassion to those who were ailing and, like sponges, they soaked in his teachings. Then, one day, Jesus announced it was time for their first exam. He placed them in pairs and said, "It's your turn. See what you can do. Now, shoo!"

The gospels provide no details on what the disciples actually did, but we can imagine them sharing parables of Jesus and watching the jaws drop at these stories that packed a punch. I envision disciples sitting at the bedside of people who were ill, listening to their agonizing stories, and praying with them. No doubt the disciples preached sermons that encouraged people to turn their lives in a fresh direction. Wherever they went, they likely did whatever they could to draw people closer to God and to be a force for good.

When the 12 returned to Jesus and shared all that had happened – funny anecdotes, puzzling reactions, ornery people, heart-pounding situations, and sacred moments – the conversation must have continued into the wee hours of the morning. I suspect Jesus heard excitement in their voices and was proud of their inaugural assignment without him.

But, apparently he also detected something else – fatigue. They had been running full throttle for weeks and their batteries were running low. Along with their excitement, there was also weariness. Jesus could spot it in them because he undoubtedly knew that feeling.

Jesus had experienced throngs of people presenting him with their problems. He knew the strain of people depending on him and constantly asking his advice. The gospels tell us of times when Jesus slipped away not only from the crowds, but from his disciples, to a quiet place in order to take a break from the demands and to refresh his energy and vitality.

Today's passage tells what happened after the disciples returned to Jesus. We read: "The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. Jesus said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many people 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."

It's interesting that the passage is silent about anything the disciples accomplished or bungled. The thrust of the passage is undeniable. After engaging in ministry, when they rendezvoused with Jesus, he said they had better get away from it all and rest.

Jesus knew what his disciples needed because he knew the importance of sabbath. Not only did the 10 Commandments establish the Hebrew rhythm of life which required rest on the sabbath day, but if we look at the poetic creation story at the beginning of Genesis, we discover that even God took a break. The conclusion of the first creation story ends like this: "And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done and God rested." (Genesis 2:2).

Work generates in us a sense of purpose and satisfaction, and ministry is an invigorating calling. But human beings also need down time; time to unplug, time to step away from the demands, time to rest, and time to reflect.

I am incredibly blessed that I've never experienced doubt about whether I was doing the right thing with my life. Despite all of my flaws and many deficiencies – maybe because of my flaws and deficiencies – the ministry seems to be what God wants me to do with my life. But this calling is also physically, emotionally, and spiritually draining. Some ministers deal with the strain by leaving a church and going to a new one every few years. Others leave a church and find a whole new profession. People who work in helping professions carry the emotional freight of other people's lives and so burnout is a hazard.

Clergy burnout has been on the rise for several years and a study of pastors by the Duke Clergy Health Initiative found that pastors "have above-average rates of depression, obesity, and chronic diseases."¹

I know that I'm a workaholic. I love what I do and I'm driven to do the best I can. However, I also know that no one can do his/her best when mentally and spiritually fatigued. Recently, I read something that took hold of me and would not let go. Here it is: "Spiritual depth does not happen by accident; it takes hard, intentional work. Basically, it is a lifelong process involving big chunks of time set aside for reading, prayer, solitude, and reflection."²

This thought kept rattling around in my mind, which I think was God's Spirit whispering, "Pay attention to this!" This same wisdom was what prompted the words of Jesus when he said to his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Jesus knew that unless you are a cloistered monk, ministry provides little time for rest, prayer, solitude, and reflection.

I beg your indulgence for a moment. Please do not hear this as whining, but I think it is only fair for you to know that the past 16 months have been among the most challenging of my 44 years of ministry. I have constantly had to rethink routines that had been long established. A great deal of brain power had to be directed at rethinking how to do worship or a meeting or a memorial service or a wedding in the midst of a pandemic. There was no "How to" guide with ready answers. Senior pastors, priests, rabbis, and imams have been wrestling with these challenges. None of us had ever experienced such a global shut down. And, as we know, this took place amid stark political division and social turmoil.

As soon as we closed the doors in March 2020 to in-person worship and events, the central question that pressed on me was: How will we keep people connected to Westminster once we halt not only in-person worship, but all in-person gatherings for months? I have spent days and nights worrying about how many people will drift away from the church and how many might withdraw their financial support.

Many hours were spent trying to figure out how we might provide a safe in-person worship experience. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention became one of my computer bookmarks and I've probably read as much about COVID-19 and respiratory droplets as I have read about theology. Further, I have been forced to learn more than I had ever planned to know about MERV ratings for air filters and ionization technology. I have added these to the very long list of things they never talked about in seminary!

What has also taxed my mental capacity is living 24/7 with the responsibility of providing safe conditions for both the church staff and our church family knowing that a poor decision could be deadly – literally.

Working with our wonderful staff and support from members who excel in health care, technology, and legal issues, I think we have done a pretty remarkable job during the pandemic. We moved so quickly to Zoom for committee meetings, we did not miss a beat. Tony, our gifted music director and organist arrived. Last summer's worship services on the lawn were a great success and set the stage for us returning to safe, in-person worship last fall. Our deacons and others have provided a vital role in keeping our members connected and cared for. Our mission activities have been nothing short of amazing. Your contributions of food and water to Emmanuel Dining Room for some 70 consecutive weeks now, have been a Godsend to the food insecure in our community. We purchased a house which helped to expand transitional housing in Wilmington. Our Peace and Justice Work Group has sponsored numerous classes on prominent social issues of our day and provided opportunities to take action on legislative issues. We have continued to touch the lives of our mission partners in Guatemala, Congo, and the Middle East, including a very successful interfaith collection for Syrian refugees. It would take more than an hour to recall all of the ministry and mission that has occurred in the past 16 months.

While all of this activity has been exhilarating, I confess that it has also been exhausting. I'm aware that my patience quota has begun to run low when I am asked questions for which there is no answer – When will it be safe for us to return to in-person activities like congregational meals and classes and meetings?

Lately I've become aware that I'm experiencing something I've never experienced before – decision fatigue – brought on by having to rethink so many things that used to require few brain cells.

Many of you know that I'm preparing to take a sabbatical. Beginning tomorrow, I'll be on study leave for a week. I have set aside several books I hope will help me begin to outline sermons for the fall. Then, a week from today I'll begin a six-week sabbatical, the chief purposes of which are rest, reflection, and renewal.

A clergy sabbatical is based on the Hebrew word *sabbat* and its chief focus is rest and the renewal of one's body, mind, and soul. It is not the same as an academic sabbatical. With academia's emphasis on publish or perish, an academic sabbatical usually entails a break for a semester or more from one's teaching and administrative duties to do research and write on a particular subject.

For clergy, who have absolutely no idea what the word "weekend" means, and who rarely have two consecutive days off, the point of a sabbatical is to **not** produce. It is the intentional decision to step out from under the pressure of constantly producing.

While I'm receiving some down time and you are getting a break from me, you will not be alone. Both Sudie and Jill will be ready to respond to any and all needs.

The weekly lectionary readings are intended for the whole church, but you can see why I found today's gospel lectionary reading especially addressed to me. I feel as if Jesus put a bullhorn to my ear and said, "COME AWAY TO A DESERTED PLACE AND REST A WHILE!" That is what I plan to do and my hope is that the most consequential decision I'll make each day is: Will I have Camilla's brownies or Woodside Creamery ice cream?

I'm confident that relieving the stress and strain for several weeks will recharge my batteries and renew my spirit. However, I believe that you, too, will benefit from having a Head of Staff who is no longer tired of making decisions and feeling a bit empty.

There are many of you who could also benefit from some down time. Everyone needs occasions for rest and renewal. I hope that what I'm doing will encourage you to carve out time to unplug from what is draining you mentally, physically, and spiritually.

God wants us to be committed to the ministry of Jesus – to spread love, to seek justice, and to work for peace – but God knows that we will not be our best if we do not take time to rest from demands and restore our souls.

Down time, away time, rest time replenishes what has been drained, and rejuvenates our soul so that new dreams can emerge. I will miss you – I really will – but I look forward to coming back in September ready to discover what new adventures God has in mind for us.

NOTES

1. Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, "Four steps clergy can take to avoid burnout," *religionnews.com*, January 6, 2020.
2. A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal*, (Washington D.C.: An Alban Institute publication, 2000), p. vi.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of all Time and all Creation,

who beckoned the dawn and preserved the darkness,
creating first: *Day* and *Night*, morning and evening,
establishing a rhythm for all that lives ...

... who set lights in the dome of the sky —
one to rule the day, another to rule the night —
that we might watch the skies and mark the passage of time ...

... who labored for six days —
calling and separating and gathering and blessing —
and, then, who rested. You rested.

You blessed the seventh day and made it holy, for — on it — you rested from all the work you had done.

God, you created rest. You commanded rest. You carved out time to rest. You call us to rest. So — like the Twelve, who heard your summons to "come away and rest" — we have come. We have gathered in this sacred place, during this sacred time, to rest in your presence.

We are weary, God, for so many reasons: Some of us are overburdened or over-programmed or overworked. Some of us are tired — our bodies can't do what they used to, our minds can't process one more thing. We are worn-out by daily demands, or worn-down by the monotony of life. We are weary of waiting ... for a cure, for an answer, for a change.

No matter what burdens we carry, no matter what weighs us down and wears us out — your promise is the same: "Come to me, all you that are weary ... and I will give you rest." Gentle One, we have come. Renew us. Rejuvenate us. Restore us, we pray, that we might go forth with fresh energy — ready to do your work.

Lord of all — who holds creation close — we pray for your weary world, especially for lands in the throes of *unrest* ... for Cuba, in crisis; for Haiti, in turmoil; for South Africa, in upheaval. We pray for communities suffering the effects of climate change, in the form of raging flames or rising floods. We pray for people and places across the globe, who do not yet know relief from this pandemic. Eternal God — who ordered the primeval waters, then rested from your labors — bring order and rest to your creation. Speak again into the chaos, so that your weary world might once again embrace the blessing you intend.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, the one who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen