

COME AWAY AND REST

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 23, 2000.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

My sermon is about rest and prayer. Rest and prayer is appropriate any time of year but especially in the summertime when many of us will be vacationing. It's also appropriate for retirees. Many retirees tell me they're busier now than ever. I want to encourage us all to rest, to pray, to take time to know God personally.

We read in the Gospel of Mark that the apostles returned from their busy work schedule and gathered around Jesus. They'd been working hard, 18 hours a day, from early dawn to midnight, teaching, preaching, healing. Mark tells us they were so busy "they had no leisure even to eat." So Jesus said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Two years ago I was feeling exhausted. We'd gone through the fire, the planning, the rebuilding, we'd gotten back into the Fellowship Hall, the first floor of the Christian education building, the sanctuary and through several capital campaigns. Many of us were tired. At that time the Lord said to me, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest a while." I contacted Father Veronis at the Greek Orthodox Church of the Ascension in Lancaster. He suggested that I spend a week with the Monks of New Skete north of Cambridge, New York. The experience was life changing.

The first day in the monastery my spiritual director advised me to rest and spend five hours a day in prayer. "You've got to be kidding!" I thought. Two of those three hours were spent in corporate worship in the chapel with the monks. The other three hours were to be spent reading the Scripture aloud and praying. I had a hard time spending fifteen minutes in prayer

and now he wanted me to spend five hours. I told my spiritual director that I could pray pretty much all I could think of in about 5 minutes. He responded, "What makes you think you've to do all the talking? Be quiet! Let God talk to you." As I read the Psalms that week I noticed how often the Psalmist speaks of waiting for God.

Since then I've tried to get away every day to wait for God in silence and I urge you to do the same. You don't have to follow my routine. Find your own. But take time each day to be alone with God. God is the source of life, the source of love, the fountainhead of knowledge. Take time to get to know God.

I go to my study at home early in the morning and sit in a wooden rocking chair with a mug of tea. I get comfortable but not so comfortable I fall asleep. I sit for several minutes in silence. I say a short prayer. Sometimes I just whisper, "Lord, my soul waits for you." Then I take my Bible and read. I begin with the Psalms and then turn to other parts of the Bible according to a daily lectionary. I read slowly. I read meditatively. I don't read for speed. Then I just sit there in silence and wait for God. I think of what I have to be thankful for and say, "Thank you...." I bring my worries before the Lord, "Lord, I'm worried about so and so." I remember people by name before the Lord. I've come to enjoy these quiet times.

My way may not be your way. But I urge you to find a way. Find time to rest with the Lord. We're so busy, so many urgent things to do. Jobs demand time and overtime. Families need lots of time and energy. Study can fill every working hour if we're students. Our houses, apartments, or yards beg for our attention. We promise to do things for the church or community organizations. Our calendars are filled with appointments: doctors, dentists, music lessons, dancing, sports, concerts, meetings. We're frustrated when we can't do everything.

"I'm so busy" we say boastfully; maybe even self-righteously as if being constantly busy is a mark of character. The busier we are, the more important we seem. In a recent *USA Today* I read: "Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the nourishment that gives us success. We miss the quiet that gives us wisdom. Poisoned by the belief that good things come only through tireless effort, we never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger. As a society, we are working more hours than ever before. Our children are involved in more extracurricular activities than we'd even heard of what we were young. Even our vacations and our play can have a driven quality to them."

I remember something T.S. Eliot wrote:

*Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word...*

*Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

Choruses from the Rock

Don Postema writes, "The world really doesn't need more busy people, maybe not even more intelligent people. It needs people who know that they need solitude if they are going to find out who they are;

*silence, if their words are to mean anything;
reflection, if their actions are to have any significance;
contemplation, if they are to see the world as it really is;
prayer, if they are going to be conscious of God,
if they are to "know God and enjoy God forever."*

The world needs people who want their lives not only to be filled, but to be full and fulfilled.

And that comes only through taking time to rest and pray.

It takes discipline to do anything well, and it's no different with prayer. For one thing, we may have to stop doing some things, some good things, in order to do something better. You

may even be able to do more if you do less. Taking time to be alone with God may actually give you more energy to do well those things which remain.

Calendars help us to discipline our time. We make appointments with everyone. My calendar is filled with appointments. Why not make an appointment with God every day. Write it in your calendar. Someone used to write in their calendar "7-7.30 a.m. -- prayer," but he found himself passing it up day after day. Then he began to write "7 - 7.30 a.m. -- God." He finds God a little harder to neglect.

The Apostles didn't have much time alone with Jesus. They managed to spend a few hours alone with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. But their rest was soon interrupted. Mark tells us that as Jesus "went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them." He saw the sick and his compassion healed them. he saw the demon-possessed and his compassion freed them. He saw the spiritual ignorant and his compassion taught them.

Where do we get the compassion we need to really care about other people? Could it be that we get compassion from the time we spend alone with God. God is the source of all compassion. In solitude before God, faced only with ourselves, we learn the compassion of God. The compassion Jesus felt for the crowds was nurtured in the solitude and silence of prayer. Let the living God nurture you. Let the Lord of life and love teach you and fill you with compassion as you spend time in the presence of the Holy One.

Let us pray:
O Lord, support us all the day long
until the shadows lengthen
and the evening comes
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over,
and our work is done.
Then, in your mercy,
grant us a safe lodging,
and a holy rest,
and peace at the last;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.