

Our Busy Lives

A sermon preached at Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 20, 1997. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56.

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

A young woman prided herself on working 18 hours a day six or seven days a week. But she'd become exhausted and realized that she didn't feel she had any value unless she was working, producing. "I've always been obsessed with work," she says. "I'm beginning to realize that it's been unhealthy for me. It's interfering with my relationships with people I love."

"My dad is always working", a boy complained. "He's never home. Even when he's home he's in his study and I'm not allowed to disturb him. His work is more important to him than his family."

Workaholism is one of the more socially accepted addictions. Alcoholism is not socially acceptable. Alcoholics can lose their jobs. Drug addiction will destroy our standing in the community or church. But the boss gives raises and the community gives awards to workaholics.

Henry Nouwen writes: We live in a pressure filled world. Busy, busy, busy. Calendars, clocks. Always pressure. "Just look for a moment at our daily routine" he said to a gathering of priests and ministers. "In general we're very busy people. We have many meetings to attend, many visits to make, many services to lead. Our calendars are filled with engagements, and our years filled with plans and projects."

At times most of us have felt worn out and run down because of our busy lives. Some of us have experienced more serious

effects of chronic stress and burnout. Our Gospel lesson addresses the problem of workaholism.

On their return from the healing mission the disciples got devastating news: John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. They were physically exhausted and grieving. So Jesus invited them to get away for a time of rest and solitude. Christ knows that our souls need time to retreat from our hectic lives. Activity and work without times of spiritual retreat leaves us exhausted and spiritually dead.

"Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while", Jesus said. The precise meaning of what Jesus said was, "Come away for yourselves." Come away for yourselves, for your own good and spiritual revival. What Jesus offered his disciples, we need also -- a quiet time each day, a quiet period of rest each week, and an extended time of rest each year.

Christ has called us to follow him in faithful discipleship. He calls us, not to be names on the roll of a church, but to minister to a needy world. The needs are always there. The gospel of Mark tells us that the throng ran on foot around the seashore trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus, listen to him, touch him. This is a vivid description of the needs of our world. The world is a needy place. The needs are never far away. It reminds us that we, the church, are in the world to minister to the needs of the world in the name and power of Jesus. But we won't be effective if we don't maintain or regain a close relationship with the living God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We protestants tend to be activists. And that's good. Over the years our church has done its share in ministering to the needs of our community and world. But activism without spiritual depth results in burn out and ineffectualness.

I've become increasingly aware of this. About a month ago I asked Father Dooner for information about going on a spiritual retreat. I also talked with Father Veronis at the Greek Orthodox church of the Annunciation in Lancaster. I feel a need to get away to restore my relationship with God through Christ. In my experience protestant retreat centers tend to be heavy on lectures on prayer and short on the actual practice of prayer and communion with God. We protestants in the mainline churches have a tendency to reduce all problems either to psychological or intellectual problems. But we're beginning to sense our need to come away and rest awhile with Christ.

So I made a commitment to take a week of my continuing education time in November to attend a directed retreat at an Eastern Orthodox monastery in Cambridge New York. I'll meet daily with a priest who will give me directions as to how to pray. I am to bring no books but my Bible. There will be no television, no newspapers. There will be no program, no lectures. It will be a time of quiet reflection, meditation, and communion with God whom we know through Christ. I hope I come back sane.

Some of our wisest community leaders realize that work is not the end all of life. We need to get away and rest awhile. When I think of Abraham Lincoln, I think of him as one of our

greatest presidents. I also think of him as a hard worker. When I was a boy I had a picture of Abraham Lincoln in my bedroom; a bare chested strong young man splinting wood with an axe. I think my parents were trying to tell me something through that picture. But you probably don't know what Abraham Lincoln once said about work. He said this: My father taught me to work, but not to love it. I never did like to work, and I don't deny it. I'd rather read, tell stories, crack jokes, talk, laugh -- anything but work."

Several months ago, when local philosopher and story teller, Thompson Hudson, still had his barber shop next to Frank's Steak House, I stopped for a hair cut. The barber shop was closed. I was irritated. He was supposed to be open. Then I thought, maybe he's sick. Maybe there's a family emergency. But look, there's a sign on the door. What does it say? "Barber shop closed today. Gone fishin'". He had the good sense to know that it's good to stop every once in a while to smell the roses.

Take time in your daily schedule to come away for yourselves in the presence of Christ? I know a women who gets up before anyone else, fixes herself some coffee and sits in her favorite chair for about ten minutes of silence. I know a seminary professor who gets away from the business of his life by taking a shower. He marinated in the shower while communing with Christ. We use to kid him by asking if he'd had his shower with Christ that morning. A businessman drives to work with the radio turned off. He's surrounded by traffic but he uses his daily 45 minute

commute as a time to rest, to meditate, to listen to what God has to say to him.

We're surrounded by needy people. We ourselves are needy. People need to know God through Jesus Christ. People need to be healed. People need to have demons cast out. They need to know they can be forgiven. They need to hear the gospel of what God has done for them through Jesus Christ. We live in a needy world. But we won't have the strength to do it - not as individuals, not as a congregation unless we come away with Christ to deserted places for ourselves and rest awhile. The early church healed people and taught boldly and took difficult stands, but did so only after prayer and because of prayer.

In a book of children's letters to God, one child writes, "Dear God, I think about you even when I'm not praying." That's a good model for prayer; to be aware of Christ and Christ's claim on our lives in the midst of busy schedules and hectic routines. It's to step out of the busyness long enough so that when we step back into it we understand who we are and why we're doing what we're doing. Only then will we be fully present for the people we're with. Only then will we be fully present in performing the tasks before us. Only then will we recognize that Christ our God is not one who is relegated to church matters, but is the one who has the whole world in his hands.*

*William B. Kincaid III, Biblical Preaching Journal, Summer 1994, page 10.

Let us pray: Eternal God, Author of our life and End of our pilgrimage: guide us by your Word and Spirit amid all perils and temptations, that we may not wander from your way, nor stumble in the darkness; but may finish our course in safety, and come to our eternal rest in you; through the grace and merit of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.