

Discover the Gift of Sabbath

“Come away...and rest a while.” Mark 6:31

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Jesus compassionately tells his weary, hard-working disciples, “**Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.**” This passage from **Mark 6:31** was the guiding theme for our All-Church Retreat yesterday at Camp Loughridge. I’ll share a few thoughts about that wonderful event near the close of this sermon.

But first, tell me, how rested are you this morning? (Daylight Saving Time going into effect last night doesn’t help, I know.) **How rested are you generally?** Chances are that most of us don’t get enough rest, and I’m not just talking about the amount of sleep we get.

Webster’s Dictionary defines ‘rest’ as “freedom from activity or labor, to refrain from exertion”, or “to be free from anxiety or disturbance.” So now let me ask you this way: How often lately have you been free from all activity or labor or exertion? How often lately have you been free from anxiety or disturbances?

If you’re like lots of folks I know, you may not even remember the last time you felt really rested. The pace of life for most of us is stuck in high gear, and that’s true for most of the retired folks I know, too. Family and friends, school and work and business associates, and community groups – including the church – ask more and more of our time.

You may be one of those kinds of people who has a hard time saying “No”. Or, you may be such an extrovert that finding quiet alone time is never on your agenda. Yet who among us hasn’t felt overwhelmed at times by the needs of others, let alone by our own needs? **Don’t we all desperately crave a few moments of peace and quiet, of genuine rest?**

Well, we’re in good company. For we learn in today’s gospel lesson from Mark 6 that even Jesus and the disciples needed ‘down-time.’ But what usually happens? Often, just like in this biblical story, when we finally do convince ourselves that we must get away and find some rest, the demands and interruptions seem to follow us nevertheless.

Don’t you wish one of the Ten Commandments was, “Thou shalt chill out.” Well, actually, there is one like that, “**Thou shalt observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.**” And as I’ll explain in a moment, the concept of *sabbath* has more to do with genuine rest and renewal than it does with our more modern interpretation of going to church every Sunday, or filling the day with an even longer list of requirements.

Jesus was undoubtedly aware of this commandment in today's text. The disciples have just returned after being sent out in pairs by Jesus to the surrounding countryside to heal and teach and spread the good news. Upon their return Jesus asks them to share how things went and what they taught. Jesus' response is to call them aside to get some rest, because he knew they were tired. God also knows that we are tired.

Added to that, the disciples were just learning of the beheading of John the Baptist. They needed time to deal with their grief, as well. We need time to deal with our grief.

One of the most important aspects in understanding how this biblical text applies to our lives is to press a little further to find out **why we choose so often not to rest**. *Sojourners Magazine*, a publication which focuses on social justice issues, had a article a few years ago by Rabbi Arthur Waskow called, "Radical Shabbat: Free Time, Free People." It is subtitled, "Honorable work *and* restful renewal are both aspects of responsibility." The rabbi reflects on how most Americans today have less time to raise children, share neighborhood concerns, or develop our spiritual life. He asks rhetorically, "Why is this happening?" and then he answers, "**Because doing, making, profiting, producing, and consuming have been elevated to idols.**"

The biblical concept of Sabbath is a critique of these particular idolatries. I guess even 3000-4000 years ago there needed to be a law to get people to slow up and get some rest. Contemporary religious leader Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Sabbath is a gift, but we are so reluctant to accept it, that God had to make it a command."

It's not that doing, working, making, and even consuming are intrinsically wrong, let alone evil. It's just that a society that never pauses long enough to catch its breath and reflect on its values tends to neglect the need to love and affirm community and family and God as it should.

So, it is helpful and reassuring to recognize that Jesus himself encouraged the disciples to take a break, to care for themselves, to recharge, renew, re-create, and (this is often the hardest part) to not feel guilty about taking time to rest.

One of the gems that emerged from the Presbyterian General Assembly in 2000 was a paper entitled, "**An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift.**" See if some of the following excerpts don't ring true for you, and perhaps for us as a congregation.

For some the need for Sabbath emerges as a cry from within. Exhausted, we yearn over the loss of time to rejoice in those closest to us, or simply to play, to rest and be still, to delight in the goodness that we believe yet surrounds us...

For some the need for Sabbath names itself in quiet grief. Grief that we are moving faster and faster in our lives, but the only progress

we seem to make is into a greater emptiness. Grief that the ways we have strained so conscientiously to live are simply not working. Grief that although we partake abundantly from the table our culture spreads before us, we come away from the table still hungry, as hurried and pressed as ever rather than nourished and renewed.

So what's the answer? To put it most simply: **Discovering the gift of Sabbath.** Referring to the commandment to keep the Sabbath, our own John Calvin (who helped invent the 'Protestant work ethic,' and whose 500th birthday we will be celebrating this year) declares that *sabbath* simply reflects God's genuine concern for God's people. **Calvin writes, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing."** And as that General Assembly report states, "And so Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is, even as God rested on the seventh day and rejoiced in all the goodness of creation."

But Sabbath is not only a time for our joy and our rest, it is also a time for our spiritual growth, deepening our communion with the Living God. "On the Sabbath," writes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "we especially care for the need of eternity planted in the soul." John Calvin simply tells us, "On the Sabbath, we cease our work so God can do God's work in us."

So how do we live the gift of Sabbath? Interestingly, our Presbyterian *Directory for Worship*, located in the center section of the *Book of Order* provides a helpful list:

- seek rest from daily occupation;
- share with others in worship;
- take time with God's word;
- engage in acts of compassion;
- enjoy activities that refresh and renew the spirit.

That's the key: finding refreshment and renewal – in whatever manner that works best for you.

Did you also notice the sense of community in that list? Rest is not just about being alone by yourself, though that is often very helpful. Finding rest means doing that which brings you renewal. And that often *includes* family and friends, and the community of faith.

That's why our **All-Church Retreat** yesterday (planned by our ACTS 16:5 Leadership Team, wonderfully led by our own Rev. Dr. Duane Bidwell, and attended by 66 of us) focused on this passage from Mark 6 about getting away together at a quiet place to get some rest. For the many of you who attended, I hope that was indeed the case for you.

While I personally liked the free time in the afternoon when a group of us hiked around the 8 acre lake, I think a majority of us found that the most

meaningful time spent was when we broke out into small groups of around 8-10 people and had very meaningful conversations and personal sharing dealing with the following questions:

- What do you value about College Hill Presbyterian Church?
- What discipleship have you participated in over the past 18 months?
- What grief do you bring to this retreat?
- What hunger do you bring to this retreat?
- What place is a quiet, deserted, or harsh place for you?
- How did you “find rest” today?

Though I can't speak for everyone, I would say that overall we did indeed leave Camp Loughridge **renewed**, especially in our **caring for one another**, and even **energized for the ministry that lies before us**.

It is my hope and prayer that each one of us re-discovers, or perhaps discovers for the first time, Sabbath - true rest and renewal. It is a gift of God that lies before us. No doubt there is a deep need for rest and renewal that burns within us.

So let us take a good close look at how we order our church life, and how we order our individual personal lives (including our work life), and see if there aren't ways that we might slow up in order to find much-needed refreshment and renewal for our bodies, minds, and souls.

One of the best and most effective paths to renewal begins by following Jesus' instruction to “Come away [with me] all by yourselves and rest a while.”
Give yourself permission to take Sabbath seriously!

Amen.