

8th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11—Year B

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

July 18, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the most insidious social and cultural impacts of the COVID pandemic has been its blurring of the boundaries between home and work, rest and productivity. For some people, this has looked like the WayFair home goods TV commercials that featured homes being transformed into makeshift daycares, schools, nursing facilities, and professional workspaces all at once – just to meet the multigenerational demands of life under quarantine. For others, it has meant living 24/7 on ZOOM, with no clear lines between the digital and the analog, the screen and the self. For others still, it has meant losing income or work, facing eviction, or watching loved ones die of COVID. We're not meant to live this way.

Fortunately, the gospel text this week reminds us of the way we ARE meant to live. Our text honors the rhythms and borders of work and play, inside and outside, online and in-person, sleep and wakefulness. Specifically, it offers us a portrait of Jesus we rarely consider, a Jesus who believes in REST.

Our gospels are filled with stories of Jesus striding from village to synagogue to hilltop to seaside, with a whirlwind of miracles, teaching in parables, and life-changing conversations swirling around him. A brisk and efficient Messiah, full of purpose but short on time. A high-strung workaholic is not, however, who emerges in our gospel reading this week. Instead, we find a Jesus who recognizes, honors, and tends to his own tiredness. We encounter a teacher who pulls his disciples away from their labor and striving. We discover a Savior who probes below the surfaces of our busyness and pinpoints the hunger our manic culture won't allow us to name: the hunger for space, reflection, solitude, nourishment, recreation, rest, and sleep.

Our gospel reading is an odd one this week, a disjointed cut-and-paste job that brackets Jesus' feeding of the five thousand to focus on the seemingly less spectacular events that precede and follow it. The beginning verses describe the return of the disciples from their first ministry tour—their inauguration into apostleship. We see them on fire, bursting with thrilling stories of the healings, exorcisms, and effective evangelistic campaigns they've pulled off on their own for the first time. They are excited and ready. In their minds, what they need is their next project from Jesus. Their next divine mission. In their minds, the crowds are waiting, and it's time to go.

But Jesus disagrees. Where the disciples see *energy*, Jesus sees *overstimulation*. Where the disciples see a *tightly packed schedule*, Jesus sees a *poor sense of balance and rhythm*. Where the disciples see *invincibility*, Jesus sees *need*, the need to debrief and reflect. The need to eat, pray, play, and sleep. The need to learn the art of solitude.

Perhaps Jesus senses that the disciples have darker stories to share with him, too – stories that will take time and tenderness to unearth. Stories of failure and rejection. Stories of doubt. Hard stories they need to process privately with their teacher. Whatever the case, Jesus recognizes that the disciples need a break. They are tired, underfed, and in significant need of rest.

He says to his disciples, “*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while,*” as the crowds throng around them at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus offers a time of rest and recuperation for his friends. He wants to make sure that their zeal for ministry – for *success* in ministry – doesn’t become an idol. He wants to make sure that they value BEING more than DOING.

Our scripture today reminds us of other, what we would consider insignificant passages, transition verses which often precede or follow the “main events” of Jesus’ life story. Passages like Luke 5:16: “*But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.*” Or Mark 11:12: “*On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.*” Or Matthew 8:24: “*but Jesus was asleep.*” Or Mark 7:24: “*He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.*” It is in these minor verses that we see essential glimpses of Jesus’ human life. His need to withdraw, his desire for solitary prayer, his physical hunger, his sleepiness, his inclination to hide. These glimpses reinforce a basic fundamental of Christianity – an omnipotent, divine and loving God has come in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ to live among us, experience firsthand all of earthly life, and save us so we can live with God forever. God hungers, sleeps, eats, rests, withdraws, and grieves. In all of these mundane but crucial ways, our God is like us. Our God rests.

To remember that God rests, that Jesus rests, is startling and humbling. If you remember, the Sabbath is the only thing in Genesis’ creation account that God calls “holy.” Why, then, do we keep running on fumes when Jesus himself insists that his followers do otherwise?

The good news today is that we follow a Savior, a shepherd who cares for and loves us so much he is willing to die for us, who is unapologetic about his need for rest and solitude, who sees no shame in retreating when he and his disciples need a break, who does so even when the needs around him continue to press in on all sides. Jesus is able to do this because he trusts God enough to let go. May we do the same. Thanks be to our faithful God. And the people say amen.