

“An Invitation”

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’”

Reading Mark’s account of Jesus’ activities in our text for today leaves one feeling almost breathless. “...many were coming and going...they had no leisure even to eat...many saw them going...they hurried there on foot...and arrived ahead of them...people...rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was....” A lot of rushing and hurrying and not much leisure. It sounds so twenty-first century, it’s hard to believe, really, that it is instead, first century. Give Jesus a BlackBerry and a pager and he would be one of us, fitting right into our stressed-out, on-edge, frenzied, frenetic age.

Those last two words, by the way, have interesting meanings and derivations. For the word *frenzy*, the meanings listed in my dictionary include: “temporary madness,” “violent mental or emotional agitation,” and “intense usually wild and often disorderly compulsive or agitated activity.” Wow! *Frenetic* comes from a middle English word meaning, simply, “insane.”

It is interesting to see Jesus and his disciples caught up in this level of busyness. Most of us tend to think that we who live in the modern world have a special claim on hyperactivity. We tend to think of Jesus as calm, composed, and peaceful living in a sleepy, slow-paced world. Yet, according to Mark, there were times when Jesus and his disciples couldn’t even find time to sit down and eat lunch.

It is our culture, of course, that invented the concept of “fast food,” the idea being not to waste too much time on a meal. You want to get it fast and eat it fast or on the run. “Grab a quick bite” is the motto. A typical American couple will grab a quick bite and then go on to the evening activity – a movie, a concert, a show, or a game. Whereas the idea in many European cultures is just the opposite, that the meal itself is the event! The meal and the conversation that goes with it, is the activity of the evening, an occasion to be shared and savored, rather than something sandwiched (no pun intended) between other events.

Why are we all in such a hurry? You walk into Wegman’s and most people look like I do when I go into Wegman’s (or any other store for that matter), like they are being timed. Someone is standing outside the store with a stopwatch and you have been given five minutes to get in and get out. “Quick, find the right cereal, grab a gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, some eggs, find the checkout lane with the fewest number of people. Is it this one? No! Woman with a full shopping cart in that one! Maybe this one....Oh no! The check-out person is calling someone over – I’ll never get out of here.”

The question that I sometimes ponder (when not caught up in this mental state) is whether we all really are that busy, or is at least part of it that in our culture it is important to look busy because to look busy is a sign of being important? In an article in the *New York Times*, entitled, *Too Busy to Notice You’re Too Busy*, the writer, Alina Tugend says she is almost embarrassed to admit that she has “time to read novels, catch a movie or play once in a while and have the occasional long lunch with a friend. “In our busy, busy world,” she says, “I sometimes feel as if I am the odd one out. Although those who are overworked and overwhelmed complain ceaselessly, it is often with an undertone of boastfulness; the hidden message is that I’m so busy because I’m so important.”¹ She refers to a book by Edward M. Hallowell, a psychiatrist, entitled *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked and About to Snap* (Ballantine Books, 2006) “who writes about how he knew he had crossed into the dark side from busy to crazy busy when he got mad at a rotary phone while staying at a vacation house. Unable to use a cell phone, he was driven nuts waiting for the dial to return to start. Then calming himself, he timed how long the dialing actually took: 11 seconds. ‘What a fool I had become,’ he writes. ‘I had become a man in a hurry even when I had no need to hurry.’

“According to Dr. Hallowell, there are many... overlapping reasons we all fall into the trap of being overly busy.” A few are:

- It is so easy with cell phones and other technology a touch away.
- It is a kind of high.
- It is a status symbol.
- We’re afraid we’ll be left out if we slow down.
- We avoid dealing with life’s really big issues — death, global warming, AIDS, terrorism — by running from task to task.
- We do not know how not to be busy.

“Not only are we constantly occupied, but we, as Americans, are also famous for not knowing how to be unoccupied” says Dr. Hallowell.

If Jesus and his disciples were at times overly busy, at least he recognized it. According to Mark, anyway, when people were constantly coming and they could not even find time to eat, Jesus took action. He invited his disciples to take a break. All four of the Gospels tell the same basic story of Jesus leading them to a deserted place, but it is only in Mark, the fast-paced Gospel, where Jesus offers this wonderful invitation to his disciples to take a break, get some rest. As it turns out, of course, the rest they seek eludes them. The deserted place they go to turns out, by the time they get there, to be no longer deserted.

But it is that invitation that I would like to hold up this morning for consideration: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” It is an invitation particularly suited to the times in which we live, where for a lot of us there is a good deal of “coming and going” and sometimes not even the leisure to eat, to share a quiet meal together.

Even retirement doesn’t slow things down for a lot of people. How often do we hear people say that they are busier now than they were before they retired? I’ve considered the possibility that some of the retired folks here at Westminster may be telling us that just so that they don’t get asked to do more at the church.

Eric Hoffer has said that “the feeling of being hurried is not usually the result of living a full life and having no time. It is, on the contrary, born of a vague fear that we are wasting our life.” But Jesus says, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” The words are so appealing. And even though, according to the text, it didn’t quite work out the way Jesus may have been hoping, still the invitation was there, is there! I don’t know, are there any deserted places left? All the places that used to be deserted have been discovered, it seems.

This text comes up about this time of year every three years in the lectionary, and it is probably a coincidence, but it is a nice one. For this time of year for many of us seems a good time to think in terms of resting. So what I see in this wonderful passage from the Gospel of Mark, is Jesus offering the spirit of Sabbath to his disciples, a well-established Biblical principal that work should be followed by rest.

Some time back the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a report that was put together by a group called the Sabbath Keeping Work Group. Despite that awkward sounding name, the report itself is pretty good. Listen to these words from the introduction of the report: “There is a deep need today to rediscover the gift of Sabbath. The need declares itself in the most intimate places of the human heart and in the broadest spheres of social and economic interchange....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. We yearn, and in our yearning we ache.

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.”²

Rest and restoration, according to the Hebrew faith, have intrinsic value in themselves and not, as they are often viewed in our work oriented world, as a way to make workers more productive. "Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles," go the words of a Jewish prayer used on the eve of beginning Sabbath.³

The real question is, how do we incorporate this kind of rest into our lives, the kind that restores our soul, that refreshes us.

A German philosopher wrote that: "Leisure is a mental and spiritual attitude...it is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a week-end, or a vacation. It is...an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul...an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being busy, but letting things happen."⁴ An attitude of mind, a condition of the soul. I think he has a point. But I also think that we need to make some space for that in our lives.

I know that we do not all have the same need. Some here may have all the solitude and inactivity they want and more. I really don't know what the answers are for those in that situation, expect perhaps to consider that maybe there is a new calling of some kind waiting for them.

But for those who find themselves in the mindset of the crazy busy, I really do think that in addition to trying to develop the mental and spiritual attitude of leisure and rest, there also needs to be some conscious effort to build times of rest into our lives.

In the category of trying to practice what you preach, one day this last week I got home from work and had a little time left in the afternoon. Several possibilities crossed my mind of what I might do with that time, all of them involving some form of work. But then I thought about this sermon I was preparing and I decided to get the hammock out and sling it between a couple of trees in the back yard and read a while. And that is what I did. It was nice. The work still needed to be done, but it could be done later.

There is a kind of rhythm to our lives suggested in the story of creation, a rhythm of work and rest. There is a kind of ebb and flow. We should pay attention to that rhythm and attend to it, for by doing so we are attending to our souls.

¹ *NYTimes*, 3/21/07

² *An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift*

³ from the GA report

⁴ Joseph Pieper, "Leisure as a Spiritual Attitude" in *Weavings*, March/April '93, p. 9.