

**9 Pentecost
July 22, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

My words this morning are about “taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.” And, they are about compassion in a world where tragedy, violence, and systemic oppression grab the headlines. They are about the need to “rest a while.”

Last week’s gospel reading was about the Beheading of John the Baptist. I mentioned then that the story of the Beheading was immediately followed by the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. I was wrong. Actually, there is a small filler between the two stories. What the text reads in Mark’s gospel is:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

That is just the first half of the reading this morning. It ends at Chapter 6, verse 34. The rest of the reading begins at verse 53.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

So, one might wonder what happened between verse 34 and verse 53. Well, not much really, just the little story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand ... oh, and the minor story of Walking on Water. Just some insignificant fillers. Actually, we will hear those stories next week. However, instead of hearing them from these missing verses of Mark’s gospel, we will hear them from John’s gospel. I think the folks who selected our lectionary readings felt that John’s stories of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and Walking on Water were told with a little more flourish in John than they were in Mark.

Anyhow, I digress from “taking seriously what Jesus took seriously,” especially in a time when tragedy, violence and systemic oppression are ever present in our lives. You see, like the headlines today, we are drawn to the dramatic stories about Jesus ... making a blind man see, a woman who has hemorrhaged for 12 years is cured, a lame man walks, the stormy sea is calmed, five thousand hungry people are fed with just a few fish and a basket of bread, and Jesus actually walked on water! However, what we miss by focusing on those extraordinary stories is what Jesus chooses to do at other times ... like in today’s reading.

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Instead of the amazing headline story of some miracle we hear a different side of Jesus. In this passage we find a Jesus who recognizes, honors, and tends to his own tiredness. We encounter a teacher who notices his disciples’ exhaustion, and responds with tenderness. We find a person who probes below the surfaces of our own frantic, “productive” lives, and pinpoints the hungers our work-obsessed culture won’t allow us to name: the hunger for space, reflection, solitude, and rest.

Jesus recognized that the disciples needed a break. They were tired, overstimulated, underfed, and in significant need of solitude. Jesus, meanwhile, was not in top form himself. He had just lost John the Baptist, his beloved cousin and prophet, the one who baptized him and spent a lifetime in the wilderness preparing his way. Worse, Jesus had lost John to murder ... a terrifying reminder that God's beloved are not immune to violent, senseless deaths. Maybe Jesus' own end felt closer to him, and his own vocation seemed more ominous. In other words, Jesus had many reasons to feel heartbroken.

"Come away to a deserted place," he said to his disciples as the crowds packed around them at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile," is how another translation puts it, and I hear both tenderness and longing in those words. Jesus wanted to provide a time of rest and recuperation for his friends. But he's weary, himself ... the hunger he articulates is his own.

Rather than hear the headline story ... the dramatic account of one miracle or another ... we hear of a more human side to Jesus. It is that human side that we so often overlook. His need to withdraw, his desire for solitary prayer, his physical hunger, his sleepiness, his inclination to hide. These glimpses take nothing away from Jesus' divinity ... for me they enhance it, making it richer and all the more mysterious.

Of course, this lesson isn’t new; it runs through Scripture from its earliest pages. In the Genesis, God rested on the seventh day, and called the Sabbath holy. Honoring this is no small feat in our 21st Century lives, where every hour of every day is measured in profits gained or advantages lost. Not only is our time valuable, but our minds are distracted by the headlines of tragedies and violence ... Syrian refugees caught between oncoming armed forces and an Israeli fence at the Golan Heights. Or, families being separated from their children at the Mexican

border. And then, there is the continuing systemic oppression on people of color and women in the world around us.

For me, rest never comes naturally. Oh, I take my naps. But, I'm talking about real rest ... the kind of rest that allows for re-creation. I tend forget about it. I push it to the back of my mind. I fear it. I resist it. To remember that God rested, that Jesus rested, is to be both startled and humbled. How dare I claim not to need a break when Jesus himself took one? The Sabbath is the only thing in the creation account that God called holy. We would do well to pay attention. We would do well to take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

But returning to the Gospel, Jesus is also like us in that sometimes, his best-laid plans to find rest go awry. According to Mark, Jesus' retreat-by-boat idea failed. The crowds anticipated his plan, and followed on foot. By the time he and his disciples reached their longed-for destination, the crowds were waiting, and the quiet sanctuary Jesus sought is nowhere to be found.

Did Jesus run? Did he turn the boat around and sail away? No. As Mark puts it, "Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them many things."

The second half of this week's Gospel reading essentially offers a repeat of the first. Remember, the story of the miraculous Feeding of the Five Thousand is in those missing verses, as is the story of Walking on Water, and then Jesus, once again, "insists" that the disciples get back in the boat and sail away. This is vacation Attempt, Take Two.

However, the crowds again anticipated Jesus' plan, and word of his whereabouts spread. As soon as the boat landed at Gennesaret, the crowds went wild, pushing and jostling to get close to Jesus. They carried their sick to him on mats. In every village and city Jesus approached, swarms of people needing healing lined the marketplaces. They pressed against him. They pleaded. They beg to touch the fringe of his robe and receive healing. And what was Jesus' response? Once again, his response was compassion. "All who touched him were healed."

In some ways, I envy Jesus the stark awareness of such need. Along with Caren and Jim Vande Berg, I am one of the founders of Compassionate St. Augustine. As most of you know, our mission is to inspire, grow, and influence a culture of compassion through awareness, advocacy, and action in our community. Yet I sometimes find it's all too easy to pass the buck on compassion. Whether I'm looking at my own needs ... or the needs of those closest to me ... or my seemingly self-sufficient neighbors ... or the needs in the wider community ... it's tempting to tell myself that nothing urgent is at stake. Things can wait. I'm allowed to procrastinate ... aren't I? After all, I'm not the last stop, am I? Surely, there are others out there that can pay attention to all those concerns.

I only wish that were true in my mind! If anything, I'm neurotic and think I'm the only one who can fix things ... everything! No matter how small or how large. The hinge on the cabinet is loose ... I'll fix it. Homelessness ... sure I can fix that as well ... just give me a little time.

I hope you realize that I am being sarcastic, and only part of what I just said about me is true ... only part of it. I think this week's Gospel reading is about the ongoing and necessary tension between compassion and self-protection. And the great lesson for us is that Jesus lived with this tension, too. If I am to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then I can learn from this less than dramatic story of Jesus trying to balance that tension between compassion and self-protection.

On the one hand, Jesus was unapologetic about his need for rest and solitude. He saw no shame in retreating when he and his disciples needed a break. On the other hand, he never allowed his weariness to blunt his compassion. Unlike me, he realized that he was the last stop for those aching, desperate crowds ... those sheep without a shepherd. Unlike me, he practiced a kind of balance that allowed his love for others, his own inner hungers, and the urgency of the world's needs to exist in productive tension.

Is there a lesson here? I'm not sure. Strive for balance? Recognize weariness when you feel it? Don't apologize for being human? Take breaks?

Yes. All of those essential things. But maybe also ... and most importantly ... this: We live in a world of dire and constant need. Sheep die without their shepherds. There are stakes, and sometimes, what God demands of our hearts is costly. While balance remains the ideal, it won't always be available in the short-term. Sometimes, we will have to "err." We'll have to bend out of balance.

If that happens, what should we do? In what direction should we bend? If this week's Gospel story is our example, then the answer is clear. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously the answer is clear ... seek rest, of course. But err on the side of compassion. That is what Jesus did.

Amen.