

**8 Pentecost
July 18, 2021**

**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.**

I don't know if you have ever heard the expression that "a camel is a horse that was put together by a committee." The larger the committee the more extraneous parts are added to try to satisfy all possible options. Well, today's reading from Mark's gospel is a consequence of the work of a committee. This particular committee is the one that selected the readings we have for each Sunday on a repeating, three-year cycle.

Notice, if you will, that the reading is in two parts: verses 30-34 of Chapter 6, then it jumps to verses 53-56. So, what is in that portion that is left out?

Well, last week in my sermon I mentioned that the story of the beheading of John the Baptist was followed immediately by Jesus going off by himself, and then feeding five thousand people. Oh, what happened to the story of feeding of the five thousand? Well, that is where the committee comes in. They chose to cut it out of today's reading. They also cut out the story of Jesus walking on the water.

What this committee did do is decide that the story in Mark's gospel wasn't good enough, so next week we will hear the story of the feeding of the five thousand, only from John's gospel. Then, on August 1st we'll hear in John's gospel Jesus say, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Then, the reading on August 8 is also from John's gospel and opens with the same line that I just read, and then ends with, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

On August 15 the reading again begins with the last line of the previous week and contains, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Then ... finally ... on August 22 the reading from John's gospel again begins with the last verse of the previous week, and then ends with, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

On August 29 we will go back to hearing readings from Mark's gospel.

It sounds to me as if someone had an agenda about Jesus being the “Bread of Life,” and Mark’s gospel was not sufficient to get that point across. So, I will leave those verses to speak for themselves ... and I’ll probably have something to say about them from this pulpit when the time comes ... but back to the reading this morning.

I read in the **New York Times** recently that researchers have found that roughly sixty percent of Americans are experiencing pandemic-related insomnia right now ... and I think I’m part of that sixty percent. Yes, we’ve made some gains in vaccinating our population, lowering nationwide mortality rates, and resuming some measure of normal life. But the numbers in the news this morning give me the feeling of déjà vu all over again.

As people in this congregation know too well, hospitals in St. Johns County and Jacksonville have closed down all elective surgery. The COVID related admissions has skyrocket in the just the past week. The news this morning is that COVID cases are up 91 percent over last week.

What began over a year ago as a natural flight-or-fight response to a global state of emergency has now morphed into something shapeless and sinister. We thought we were getting back to normal ... whatever that new normal may look like. Instead, we’ve lost a sense of balance and rhythm ... we can’t get started on the one hand, and we can’t catch a breath on the other. Just when we started to relax, we are reminded to be vigilant ... super-vigilant ... or else. We’re anxious ... at least I am ... and I’m sleepless ... overstimulated ... and most of the time feeling helpless.

And this is not just about COVID. We are dealing with the tragedy of the condo collapse in south Florida ... a divided nation that scares me on many levels. Then there are the consequences of climate change that are becoming all too obvious ... at least to most of us ... wildfires and scorching heat in the West ... deadly storms in Europe ... sea level rise ... and more and stronger hurricanes and tornados right in our backyard.

So let’s look at our reading this morning.

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 ... [Jesus] ... 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.

Like the headlines today, I think we are most often 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."

This morning, instead of the amazing headline story of some miracle we hear a different side of Jesus. Maybe it is because I'm rather sensitive to these issues right now, but in this passage I find a Jesus who recognizes, honors, and tends to his own tiredness. I encounter a teacher who notices his disciples' exhaustion, and he responds with tenderness. I find a person who probes below the surfaces of his own frenetic, "productive" life, 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 mentor and friend. 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 find a quiet place. These glimpses take nothing away from Jesus' divinity ... for me they enhance it, making it richer and all the more mysterious.

For me, rest never comes naturally. Oh, I take my naps ... my auto-immune diseases come with fatigue. But, I'm talking about real rest ... the kind of rest that allows for re-creation. I tend to forget about it ... I push it to the back of my mind ... I resist it. To remember 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 for 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 R & R attempt ... this Rest & Re-Creation 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 begged for the opportunity to just touch the fringe of his robe. And what was Jesus' response? Once again, his response was compassion. "All who touched him were healed."

In some ways, I envy Jesus's the stark awareness of such need. 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. We could use a paver sidewalk ... sure, no problem. We need an audio/visual setup to broadcast our worship services live on YouTube ... I can handle that. 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 ... compassion for others and compassion for self. And the great lesson for us ... for me ... 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 possibly 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 obvious ... seek rest, of course ... but err on the side of compassion. That is what Jesus did.

Amen.