

## COME AWAY AND REST A WHILE

*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.*

*Mark 6: 30-32*

Do you remember the story we considered a few weeks ago, about the time Jesus and the disciples were crossing the sea in a small boat and encountered a thunderstorm? And do you remember where Jesus was in the middle of all the chaos? That's right. He decided that this boat ride would be a good time for a quick nap, and apparently he was a sound sleeper. And do you remember how the disciples woke him up? They shouted at him, "How can you sleep at a time like this? Don't you care about us?"

This week, Jesus doesn't talk them into another thrilling boat ride, but rather sends them out in pairs on an equally stressful mission, a kind of on-the-job training in the teaching and healing ministry that they would be taking on after his departure from them. And it's hard to tell from Mark's concise writing just what the mood is as they come back together and report on their activities. But from the brief description of them coming and going and barely having time to eat or sleep, I can imagine that their nerves are a bit frayed, when they do find the time, sleep doesn't come easy, and they may be hard pressed to remember just which village they were in yesterday.

Whatever the mood, Jesus senses their exhaustion and before they get a chance to ask, "Don't you care about us?" he shows them that he does. He cared about them when they were in danger on the sea, and he cares about them now when they are in danger of burning themselves out. And that is the first thing to notice in this story—that Jesus does take notice of his flock. Like a good shepherd, he knows his sheep. His compassion for the people around him is large enough to include those who are closest to him, the ones we often overlook when we think of serving and helping others.

Do you ever wonder if anyone knows and understands what you are going through, and if anyone really cares? So many of us quietly carry burdens and worries that keep us awake at night, anxieties and stresses that distract our attention by day. Even as we slowly inch our way through the lifting of pandemic restrictions, many of us may still feel the weight of this past year on our shoulders. The new word for it is "languishing." It is not a full-blown clinical depression; it's not a specific anxiety. According to the psychologist Adam Grant, "Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield." And he says, "it might be the dominant emotion of 2021." (*New York Times*, May 5, 2021)

But whether it is the stagnation of languishing, the over-stimulation of parenthood, or the everyday pressures of work and home, the constant stresses of family and relationships—we all, at one time or another, find ourselves on the cusp of burning ourselves out.

And so, the second thing to notice in this story is how Jesus reacts to the stress of his disciples. He remembers his own teaching about birdwatching and flower tending, about anxiety and worry, and he calls a time out. He recommends a retreat, a time for a bit of what we call self-care, a time to restore and recharge.

And it is important to notice that it is Jesus who initiates this retreat. Unlike the incident in the boat, he is not waiting for the disciples to demand action. He is being proactive. So this is not just a concession to the weaknesses of mere mortals, it is a validation of the practice of self-care. And we know that self-care is a practice that Jesus himself follows. In all the gospel accounts, there are those occasions when Jesus goes off by himself to a quiet place and spends time in prayer and meditation. Early in Mark's gospel it says, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." But then it adds, "And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'" So even Jesus knew what it was like for a toddler to follow you into the bathroom when you are just trying to get a few moments to yourself.

Jesus is not only our model for self-giving, he is also our model for self-care. And he shows us that the two are not in opposition but are complementary. Practicing healthy self-care is not the same thing as being self-centered. All the things we have been taught about giving yourself away for the sake of others—they still apply. But, as someone said, you can't give what you don't have. So it becomes an issue of stewardship—of making the best use of what we have been given and giving the very best we have to offer. It is something that Paul understands when he suggests that our bodies are a kind of living sacrifice, and he urges us to transform our body, mind, and spirit so that we can be an acceptable temple of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 12: 1-2, 1 Corinthians 6: 19)

And then, did you notice that when Mark comments on the hectic pace of the disciples' lives, he also mentions that they hardly had time to sit down for a proper meal? We have noticed before the role that food and eating together at table play in the biblical world, particularly in building and sustaining community. But it seems that eating also plays a role in healthy self-care. It is probably not just a coincidence that when the retreat plans are interrupted by a crowd of some 5,000 people, the compassion of Jesus finds expression in feeding them. And not just filling their empty stomachs with a miraculous meal from five loaves and two fish. Jesus invites these anxious people to sit down in the cool green grass of a meadow, take a load off their feet and their minds, and take the time to eat, Mark says, until they are satisfied.

It reminds me of a story by Raymond Carver called "A Small, Good Thing." In this story, the parents of an 8-year-old boy are reeling from his death following an accident on his birthday, and they take out their grief and anger on an unsuspecting baker, who, unaware of the boy's death, has been leaving them phone messages asking why they haven't picked up the birthday cake they ordered. When they finally confront him in his bakery in the middle of the night, and when the truth finally comes out, the baker is overcome with remorse and his own grief, and he invites them into his kitchen. They sit at a small table. Sensing the draining, three-day ordeal this couple have gone through, the baker tells them, "You probably need to eat something," and he offers them fresh-baked cinnamon rolls and coffee. He says, "You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing at a time like this." Sitting around an old card table in that warm bakery kitchen, they all find a brief respite from their grief and anguish. And in the closing scene of this story, they find a restorative, healing power in breaking bread together.

"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent rays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of

light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.” (Raymond Carver, “A Small, Good Thing,” in *Where I’m Calling From*, pp. 330-332)

Whether you feel like you are languishing, or you feel like you are stretched to the breaking point; whether the stresses of the pandemic year are weighing you down or the stress of everyday life is wearing you out—Jesus says to you today, “Come away and rest a while.” The same Jesus that in Matthew’s gospel says, “Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11: 28)

It’s OK to acknowledge that things are not always OK. It’s not only OK, it is a healthy practice, a spiritual discipline, a small, good thing to take some time away. It doesn’t require an elaborate and expensive vacation adventure to some faraway land or tropical paradise that often leaves us even more exhausted and depleted. The restoration your body and soul needs can be found right here in our own community, in our neighborhood, in our own back yard. Slow down your pace. Turn off your electronic devices for a while. Sit in the sun by the lake and listen to the waves. Take a leisurely stroll down a tree-lined path and listen to the birds. Sit in the shade and read a book just for the pleasure of reading. Sit at a table with someone you love and take the time to share a slow, simple meal. Rest. Breathe. Eat. Play. Pray. Feed your soul, feed your body, feed your mind.

And then, after you rest, recharge, and find your center—you get up again. The practice of self-care is not a call to retreat from the world forever, or to wall ourselves off from the needs of others. Self-care becomes a problem only when, as Frederick Buechner suggests, “instead of leading you to share with others the self you love [and care for], it leads you to keep your self in perpetual safe-deposit. You not only don’t accrue any interest that way but become less and less interesting every day.” (*Beyond Words*, p. 323)

We practice self-care while remembering that God’s love and care for the world still come in person—and that person is still you. And so, you take time to rest a while, to let the good shepherd restore your soul, so that the person who brings that love and care to the world is the best person you have to offer.

As Jill Duffield reminds us, “[You] sit down and eat so that you can get up and get moving again and feed others.” (“Looking into the Lectionary,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, July 16, 2018)  
May it be so.

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