

Come Away and Rest

Psalm 46:1-11 & Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 19th July 2009

Jesus said, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mk. 6:31) Mark’s Gospel tells us, “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (Mk. 6:31).

Come away. Rest a while. An invitation. An imperative. A command, really. We know about Jesus’s other commands: “Follow me (Mk 1:17).” “Love one another (Jn 13:34).” “Let the children come to me (Mk 10:13).” “Forgive, if you have anything against anyone (Mk 11: 25).” “Come away...and rest a while”? We probably don’t think of this text as a command from the Lord meant for us. A suggestion, maybe. An option. Maybe a luxury. Perhaps one day when I find the time. Oh, I don’t have time to get away, we say to ourselves. There’s no time to rest. There’s much going on. There’s *work* to be done. People need me. People are counting on me. Or, maybe conscious of how much others are working (or how much we think they are working), all the hours they’re putting in, especially the workaholics, we feel guilty if we work less or entertain some time off.

Can you sense the frenetic activity in this text? The disciples have just returned to Jesus, eagerly reporting on their mission activity. Jesus sent them out to the villages, two by two, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom (Mk. 6:6b-13). They were “coming and going,” Mark tells us, that “they had no leisure even to eat.”

Coming and going. Forgetting to eat. No time for leisure. No time to play. No time for idleness. Sounds like our lives, doesn’t it? We’re coming and going, 24/7, and it’s not all kingdom work. In our age we’re coming and going and going and coming and at times we’re not even sure where we’re going or why or for what purpose. *The frenzied, feverish pace of our frenetic lives is one of the deep illnesses of our age.* People are working more and more.

Do you really maintain a sabbath every week? No work. No email. An entire day set aside for God? I try, but it’s especially tough when one “works” on the sabbath. Many pastors try to set aside another day of the week for sabbath—not for a day off, but for sabbath. But it’s tough. It’s very tough to do in our age. Even with our wealth and technological advances, we’re pushing ourselves harder than ever. “Time-off” or “down time,” or “leisure time” are becoming increasingly more difficult to find—and enjoy. And when we do take the time, we soon discover it’s not enough. It takes about two weeks for us just to unwind and relax. That’s not enough time to feel restored.

Do we work too much as Americans? Are we too obsessed with work? When do we take the time to rest? Most Europeans, for example, have about thirty days of vacation each year: six weeks in Switzerland, twenty-five days in France; thirty days in Germany, plus holidays. They might not have the same standard of living as most Americans. They might not have as much as we do in terms of, say, the size of our homes, the number of cars that we own, all the things that fill our homes. From my time living in Europe and traveling throughout Europe, it seems that

they have a *quality* of life and approach to life that we Americans could learn a lot from. Europeans have a healthier balance between work and leisure. I find it amazing that in very secular Europe most businesses and shops, including supermarkets, are closed on a Sunday.

Thanks to the formation of labor unions in America—“the people who brought you weekends”—most Americans don’t have ten or twelve-hour work days or a six day work week (although those in upper management in corporate America certainly do). Since 1850, the average work week has been reduced by thirty-one hours. During the Depression in the 1930s there was a move to shorten daily work hours. Henry Ford (1863-1947) believed that with a shorter workday workers would then be able to consume more in their free time. Today, vacations, time off for maternity (and paternity), and even “family leave,” are standard parts of a benefits package for many, but certainly not for all. With all this free time, why are we busier than ever?

The amenities of modern life don’t necessarily enhance our experience of leisure. A community of Amish people were once [offered](#) a television set. Do you how they responded? They said, “If we were to add television to our lives, what would we take away? Conversation with our children? Reading? Praying?” They graciously declined.¹

The average American works closer to 50 hours per week, some at multiple jobs. Consider the relentless assault of email and text messaging, and because many can now work anywhere in Zoom calls from home, it’s more difficult to separate work from non-work. We’re always in work mode, rarely detached or distracted or unplugged from work. It’s tough to go off the grid, to go away to a deserted place. You can turn your computer off or shut down your cell phone, but all it takes is one button to fire everything up. To be off the grid one has to make a conscious decision be in a place without cell phone reception or the internet.

This means there’s even more pressure to make the use of “free time.” Eight hours for work; eight hours for sleep; eight hours for recreation. That’s how Robert Owen (1771-1858), social reformer and early founder of Socialism, hoped to carve out the day for those who lived in his communal experiment in New Lanark (near Glasgow), Scotland, back in 1817. In 1836, crowds marched in the streets of the U.S. demanding an eight-hour workday (which didn’t come until much later). For many today it’s ten hours for work; six hours for sleep; maybe eight hours for everything else. It’s not surprising that people have stopped going to worship on Sundays because, as I hear (and at some level, understand), “It’s the only day I can really rest.” Saturdays are filled with chores and sports. Sunday is the only day to sleep in, I hear.

Even prayer gets shortchanged in our busy lives. Maybe we pray if we have some extra “free time.” Prayer can seem like an inefficient use of one’s time. How can one judge its effectiveness?

We must be productive. We must be busy—and if we’re not busy, we need to look busy. “How are you?” we’re asked. And we say, “Oh, I’m busy. I’m very busy. I’m extremely busy.”

It’s been said that if the devil can’t make you bad, he’ll make you busy.

In a *New York Times* article several years ago, titled "[The Busy Trap](#)," Tim Krieder explains that our "busyness" often serves as a euphemism for "exhaustion." We've become so busy with keeping ourselves busy that we're drained, restless, sleepless, and well, exhausted. And we have only ourselves to blame. "Busyness," Krieder writes, "serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day."²

They say, "Idleness is the devil's workshop." In his classic text on economics, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1725-1790), born in Scotland, known as the father of economics, and a staunch Presbyterian, believed that "activity is only truly productive if it takes raw material and makes it into something useful; the idle produce nothing."³

When we are idle or engaged in activity that doesn't produce measurable results—like prayer, meditation, thinking or contemplation, worship, play, or sleep—then we soon feel guilty. And so, we work more and more. Sometimes we really love our work. We work countless hours and lose track of time because we love it, the work flows naturally from what we love. Other times we work because we are driven by *another*: we work hard because we have to if we want to improve our standard of living or increase our wealth or to get out of debt or to provide for our families or to pay college tuition or impress our neighbors or to prove something to ourselves. But at what cost?

Sleep deprivation is pandemic in our society. In an article in *Psychiatric Times* titled, "[Sleep Deprivation, Psychosis and Mental Efficiency](#)," Dr. Stanley Coren, head of the Human Neuropsychology and Perception Laboratory at the University of British Columbia, writes that insufficient sleep takes a considerable toll on our bodies, on our mental health, and is potentially disastrous for others. Coren found that "our societal sleep debt is so great that simply losing one additional hour of sleep due to the spring shift of daylight saving times can increase traffic accident rates by 7 % and death rates due to all accidents by 6.5%."⁴ And we now know the [correlation](#) between lack of sleep at midlife and some forms of dementia and Alzheimer's later in life.⁵

"Come away," Jesus said. "Rest a while." Into the frenetic, crazed rush of our lives come these words, this gracious imperative:

STOP!

Come away. Rest a while. Even the Lord of the universe, heaven-bent on the work of the kingdom, who commissioned his people to work, to serve, to follow, knows that in order for us to do the work God calls us to do, in order to be fully human, as Jesus was fully human, *we need to step away from it all and rest.*

Chart Jesus' movement through Mark's Gospel and you'll find a gracious rhythm there: work, then rest, in order to work, in order to rest, which includes time to pray and to worship, to nourish the spirit and the body. In *compassion*, Jesus is saying to his over-worked

followers, “Come away.” *You need to get away from the crowds and the endless expectations of others to a lonely place, a deserted place, or, literally, a private place. Still. Rest in me.*

“Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

But the disciples seem resistant. Read the text carefully. “Come away to a deserted place – *all by yourselves* – and rest a while.” Jesus says, “You. I’m *talking to you, not to them, not to the crowds pressing in. You need to rest.*”

The literal meaning of “rest” here means “to cease.” STOP. And it carries this implicit meaning: it’s a call to rest in order to gain strength. The word was used to describe the necessary rest a soldier takes or the rest given to a plot of land so that growth and the bearing of fruit can take place at a later time and place.⁶

Did you notice that today’s reading skipped about twenty verses? In these verses, Jesus fed at least at least 5,000 people, *and* walked on water (!), and then in verse 53, healed the sick. Wherever he went people begged him for healing, eager just to get a touch of his cloak. Jesus packed a lot into a day. Even though he commands the disciples to rest here—and they had some time away together—the work of God continues, the work of compassion continues, it never stops. We know that Jesus took time away to rest, to pray, to reconnect with God, to be grounded. Without that connection, that grounding Jesus, too, would have been consumed by the needs of the people, he would have succumbed to compassion fatigue by day two. Because Jesus took rest seriously, we need to do the same, even more. *For the needs of God’s people are enormous and never ending; we have to be prepared.* Why are we so arrogant to think that we don’t need time for rest and renewal?

After this demanding year, as we slowly try to come out of this pandemic, we mustn’t underestimate the enormous strain our bodies and minds have been under. We have all experienced a massive trauma, whether with a small “t” or capital “T,” it’s still trauma. We have to carve out time to rest—to sleep, to care for our bodies, to sort through our emotions, but also to pray, to worship, to do those things that feed our souls, that open up and bring joy to the heart, that ground us, that remind us *who* we are (and who we aren’t) and of *whose* we are (and of whose we aren’t). We have to do this for ourselves, because no one else is going to do it for us. Sometimes people do remind us to take a break. When I started to serve at the church in Mendham, there were people early on who asked me every week about my workload. Did you take time off this week? And here, too, over the years, there have been people who have asked the same. Did you take time off this week?

Come away. Rest. It’s not a luxury in God’s kingdom; it’s a command. It’s required. Like keeping the sabbath, it’s a law designed to give us life. It’s a word of wisdom and grace for our souls. If only we can hear it given in love. Jesus knows what’s best for us. Stop. Cease. Slow down. For God’s sake, for the kingdom’s sake, for your sake, get some rest.



Carving in a prayer bench in the cloister of Iona Abbey, Iona, Scotland.

¹ Story told by Jim Rice, “[Why Play: Contemplation, freedom, and the spirit of leisure](#),” *Sojourners Magazine*, January-February 1997. Rice’s extremely insightful article provides the contemporary social context for my reading of the Mark text.

² Tim Krieder, “The Busy Trap,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2012.
https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/30/the-busy-trap/?_r=0.

³ Jim Rice’s summary of Adams. The complete title of this text, the first modern work of economics was, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published on 9th March 1776 in Edinburgh.

⁴ Stanley Coren, “Sleep Deprivation, Psychosis, and Mental Efficiency,” *Psychiatric Times* (March 1, 1998), Vol. 15, No. 3.

⁵ Sleep Problems and Dementia: <https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-dementia>.

⁶ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Clean L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 80.