

## **“To a Deserted Place”**

Salado UMC—22 July 2018: Ninth after Pentecost

Preaching Text: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

+++++

**“Laziness is nothing more than the habit of resting before you get tired”**

**Jules Renard—(1864—1910).**

+++++

In life, we all make assumptions about situations in which we find ourselves. This keeps us from beginning from scratch each time we encounter a circumstance. For example, if we want to find and then check out a book out of the Salado library, we naturally expect that the book-shelvers put the volumes back according to the Dewey Decimal system. Or when we pump gas, we take for granted that the pump marked “no lead gas” is not diesel. Without typical assumptions we might spend all our time pointlessly verifying already established facts.

We all make these kinds of assumptions hundreds of times each day. We preacher-types are no exception. We even make guesses about our congregations. Yet, these assumptions are often dangerous. If I assume you know a lot about the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)—and you may not—then I run the risk of talking on matters about which you have little experience. If I assume you don’t know about the RCL—and you do understand how the lectionary functions—then I run the risk of talking down to listeners. I fear either mistake.

The RCL offers a list of four scripture lessons for each preaching occasion of the Christian year. For us this is generally on Sundays with holy days, such as Maundy Thursday or Christmas Eve. The RCL is planned by the church year. The RCL lessons refer to the hope and birth of Messiah at Advent/Christmas. During Lent, the lectionary offers texts about Jesus’ passion. Today, our Pentecost text highlights something of value for leading the Christian life and being the church of Jesus Christ. Yet, interestingly there is a hole in Mark’s Gospel story the way the RCL sets up the text. Hear the day’s lesson, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56:

**[30] The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. [31] 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. [32] And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. [33] Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. [34] 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.**

**[Omitted: The Feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walks on the water]**

**[53] When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. [54] When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, [55] and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. [56] 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 (Mark 6:30-34, 53-56).**

I suppose the reason that the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water are not included in our day's lesson is because the RCL employs these stories in other places for other preaching days. Thus, we focus on two concerns of this particular text. We could describe these issues as our modern penchant for over-extending our work and our need for a good shepherd as a guide and protector.

First, the words "overscheduled" and "overworked" describe modern life. Yet, do we really expend more energy now than did our ancestors? Perhaps survival conditions compelled our ancestors—until recently—to endure daily toil. Today we rather choose to be busy. If stewardship is "managing the gifts and graces that God loans us," then how do we value rest and contemplation as part of that management?

Mark's lesson relates that the apostles had been hard at work. We infer this detail from their telling Jesus "all that they had done and taught." Clearly Jesus sensed their fatigue. Jesus said, "Come away to a deserted place . . . and rest a while." All the activity that swirled around Jesus, no doubt, had worn on the twelve. Their activity had so absorbed them that "they had no leisure even to eat." Jesus' suggestion about rest for the disciples was not unique. God long before wove respite and rest into the fabric of Hebrew life (see, for example: Genesis 2:2, 3; Exodus 16:23, 30; 20:11; 35:2; Deuteronomy 5:14; Matthew 11:28-29; Hebrews 3:11, 18; 4:1, 3-5, et. al.).

We find in Exodus the first explicit mention of Sabbath in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses tells the people what God has related to him: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord" (Exodus 16:23). Solemn rest appears to be the primary purpose for Sabbath. Of course, later in Israel's life, Sabbath also functions as a day of worship (Exodus 20:8, 11) and a day of remembrance for what God has done for God's people (Deuteronomy 5:15). Indeed, Sabbath observance reminded the people of God's covenant (Leviticus 24:8). In a nutshell, Sabbath-keeping occasioned rest, remembrance, worship, and covenant renewal for Israel. Jesus knew this commandment well.

Ironically, according to worship statistics, modern people observe Sabbath less and less. Yet, we seem to need rest and renewal more than ever. What separates us from the ancients is not decreased faith; rather our life's outlook is more utilitarian. Modern people often ask, "Is this worth my valuable time?" when settling on our time/energy for a task. People in more ancient times asked: "Will I have anything to eat today? Will I live into tomorrow?" Today we rarely value rest's restoring capacity.

Into this modern perspective Jesus' wisdom guides us. The gospel's labor of love in teaching, feeding, and caring for people's minds, bodies, and souls is demanding work. From time to time those who offer themselves to God's world must retreat from the fray. In retreat, called going away "to a deserted place," Jesus assumes that the rest Sabbath offers Israel would likely benefit apostles. By extension, Jesus' counsel of rest makes good sense to our culture of utility. More and more activity does not bring successful or effective life. This life of hectic activity looks astonishingly like hamsters running on a wheel. The Bible is clear about Sabbath keeping—indeed it is one of the commandments to which modern people often pay merely lip service. Jesus extols rest, recommending it to his disciples and, as a result, to us.

Perhaps we think we are too sophisticated today to accept ancient wisdom's directives regarding rest. Still, something interesting is happening in secular thinking. Steven Covey's run-away best-selling book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* uses an analogy of taking a break while sawing wood to sharpen the saw. This seemingly minor insight makes the worker more fruitful. This is what rest, and

especially Sabbath rest, does for those engaged in the challenging work of discipleship as stewards. Covey urges modern folks to “cultivate the habit of sharpening the saw physically, mentally, and spiritually every day” (*Principle-Centered Leadership*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992, p. 140). The Bible told us this all along. This rest is Jesus counsel, too.

A second idea this text offers is when God promises us a shepherd, he promises us the good shepherd Jesus will look out for the sheep—us. Jesus offers us a gift he offers the disciples: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Jesus senses the disciples are physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausted. Thus, as a good shepherd who cares for the sheep, Jesus invites the disciples to give themselves permission to rest and to refresh themselves. The gift of respite that God offered the Hebrews, God also offers us in Jesus’ words.

Perhaps you remember when Jesus said: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). There are few things that can make us more effective disciples than taking time to refresh our weary bodies and exhausted spirits. In perhaps a much later version of the same notion, Jug Sharp once said: “There are few problems that a good nap can’t fix.” All I can say about this is “Amen.”

David N. Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado TX 76571