

Sermon for Pentecost IX—Year B 2018
Err On the Side of Compassion

*For many were coming and going,
and they had no leisure even to eat.*

This is a rather apt description of the lives many people live today, isn't it?

Young professionals too busy to pause for a real lunch, munching on vending machine fare while working at their desks.

Teens grabbing a bagel or a donut for breakfast on their way out the door to school.

Parents and kids driving through a succession of fast-food restaurants between after-school lessons and sports practices.

Commuters sipping on double lattes on their early morning drive.

We are a people besieged by activities and responsibilities that reshape even basic functions such as eating.

Our busyness prevents many from gathering for family meals.

We can even forget that we enjoy stopping to eat together—especially when we find pleasure and fulfillment in the many other activities that make up our days.

Actually the line about many people coming and going and having no leisure even to eat is a good description of our first day at the Youth Gathering in Houston.

Everyone took time to eat breakfast before our flight, but we decided to wait to eat a late lunch or early dinner when we arrived at the hotel in Houston.

Well, this did not work out so well for us.

You see there were so many people arriving at the airport along with us for the Gathering,

we ended up waiting for over an hour to get our shuttle to pick up our rental car.

There was a similar hustle and bustle at the rental car stop, which delayed us further.

We arrived at the hotel with only enough time to throw our bags in our rooms, run to the registration area to get our wristbands, and jump on the bus to get to Mass Worship at the dome. We thought we might be able to get something to eat there. But, once again, there were so many coming and going, all the food trucks and concession stands were closed by the time we arrived . . . and it was time to get our seats for worship. Houston is not like New Jersey or New York. The sidewalks roll up at 10 and so we couldn't get anything to eat when we got back to the hotel either. We went to bed rather hungry that night. Don't worry . . . I took a page out of Jesus' playbook in this passage, I made the team "come away" and take time for a really good breakfast the next morning.

The logistics of planning for meals was a particular challenge at the Gathering this year and so I am especially grateful for this week's gospel which offers a portrait of Jesus that I don't consider often enough. When I read the gospels, I tend to envision a brisk and efficient Jesus — full of purpose but short on time — striding from village to synagogue to hilltop to seaside, a whirlwind of miracles, parables, and life-changing conversations swirling around him. In fact, for most of my life, I have thought of Jesus as a Type A workaholic, a superhero striving to save the world before his clock runs down.

But a breathless zealot is *not* who emerges from this week's gospel reading. Instead, we find a Jesus who recognizes, honors, and tends to his own tiredness as well as the tiredness of others.

We encounter a teacher who notices his disciples' exhaustion,
and responds with tenderness, with compassion.
We find a Savior who probes below the surfaces
of our frantic, "productive" lives,
and pinpoints the hungers our work-obsessed culture
won't allow us to name:
the hunger for space,
for reflection, for solitude, and for rest.
Having spent several days now meditating on this passage,
I wonder if the striving, hurrying Jesus I usually think of
is really Jesus at all.
Maybe that hurrying, striving Jesus is
a distorted mirror image of me.
My own busyness.
My own long-held dread of "wasting time."

This week's passage is an odd one, really.
Did you notice that is a disjointed cut-and-paste job of verses
that bracket the story of the feeding of the five thousand
to focus on the seemingly less spectacular events
that precede and follow it.
The first paragraph of today's gospel, verses 30 to 34,
describes the return of the disciples from their first ministry tour—
their inauguration into apostleship.
Exhilarated and exhausted,
they have stories to tell Jesus —
thrilling stories of healings, exorcisms,
and effective evangelistic campaigns.
But Jesus senses that there are darker stories in the mix as well —
stories of failure and rejection, perhaps.
Stories of doubt.
Hard stories they need to process privately with their teacher.

Whatever the case, Jesus recognizes
that the disciples need a break.
They're tired, over-stimulated, underfed,
and in significant need of solitude.

Meanwhile, Jesus is not in top form himself.
He has 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 has lost him to murder,
a terrifying reminder that God's beloved
are not immune to violent, senseless deaths.
Maybe Jesus' own end feels closer,
and his own vocation seems more ominous.
In other words, he has many reasons to feel heartbroken.

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

So the first lesson I take from this passage—
pay more attention to the “throwaway” passages
in the gospels—the little transition verses
that precede or follow the “main events” of Jesus’ life story.

In these “minor” verses,
we see essential glimpses of Jesus’ humanity.
His need to withdraw,
his desire for solitary prayer,
his physical hunger,
his tiredness.
All these glimpses take nothing from his divinity—
No, they enhance it,
making his Incarnation richer and more mysterious.
They remind me that the Incarnation truly is God’s great gift of
love to the world —
the God of the whole universe —
hungers, sleeps, eats, rests, withdraws, and grieves.
In all of these mundane but crucial ways,
our God in Christ is like us.
Our God *rests* . . . and wants us to have rest, too.

Of course, this lesson isn’t new;
it runs through scripture from its earliest pages.
In 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.

For me, rest never comes naturally.
I forget about it. Sometimes I even 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 Christ himself took one?
Have you ever noticed that the Sabbath
is the only thing in the creation account that God called holy?
We would do well to pay attention to that.

But returning to the gospel,
Jesus is also like us in that sometimes,
his best-laid plans to find rest go awry.
(I can certainly relate to that!!)
According to Mark, his retreat-by-boat idea fails.
The crowds anticipate his plan, and follow on foot.
By the time he and his disciples
reach their longed-for destination,
the crowds are waiting,
and the quiet sanctuary Jesus seeks is nowhere to be found.
Does Jesus run?
Does he turn the boat around and sail away?
No. As Mark puts it,
*“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.”*

The second paragraph of this week's passage
is essentially a repeat of the first.
The miraculous feeding of the five thousand over,
Jesus once again "insists" that the disciples get back in the boat
and sail away. Vacation attempt, Take Two.

But once again, according to Mark,
the crowds anticipate Jesus' plan,
and word of his whereabouts spreads.
As soon as the boat lands at Gennesaret,
the crowds go wild,
pushing and jostling to get close to Jesus.
They carry their sick to him on mats.
In every village and city Jesus approaches,
swarms of people needing healing line the marketplaces.
They press against him. They plead.
They beg to touch the fringe of his robe and receive healing.

How does Jesus respond?
Once again, his response is compassion:
"and all who touched him were healed."

On the last day of our Gathering experience,
we made time to have a good breakfast
before our flight homeward.
Each member of the team shared what had impacted them
and what they had learned—
what was something they were taking away.
As we were going over our experiences,
I began thinking about our first day—
wondering whether there was more to learn from it than
just making better plans next time by making a lunch,
or finding out about late night pizza delivery to hotel rooms.
I suddenly realized that we had had a glimpse of what so many
people in our country face every day—
the scarcity of access to food,
we had experienced a form of food insecurity for one day.
People (many of them children) live this way
not just for a day, but for weeks and months even years.

It was a very humbling realization—
especially when I also realized
that while we could remedy our need for nourishment
by the next morning, others cannot and will not.

This experience and realization makes me want to be more
aware of such needs as Jesus was.
Here, in my cozy middle-class American life,
it's too easy to pass the buck on compassion.

In the midst of my busy-ness of responsibilities and activities,
sometimes it's tempt to tell myself that not everything is urgent.
Some things can wait.

After all, I'm not the last stop, am I?
Not much depends on *me*.

Or does it?

Another lesson from this week's passage is
about the ongoing and necessary tension
between compassion and self-protection.

It is important for us to know that Jesus lived with this tension, too.

On the one hand,

he was unapologetic about his need for rest and solitude.

Jesus 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.

He realized that he *was* the last stop
for those aching, desperate crowds —
those sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus 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.

So what is the take away lesson for you today?

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 will have to bend out of balance.
If that happens, what should we do?
In what direction should we bend?
How will we respond?

If this week's gospel story is our example,
then the answer is clear.
Seek rest, of course.
But err on the side of compassion.
That's what Jesus did.