

"A Quiet Place to Rest"
Mark 6:30-46
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Worship Question: When was the last time you rested in God?

Today, while we have our women's retreat and we are partnered with Lansdale UMC and their men's retreat, I wanted to also talk about the idea of retreats. What is a retreat? That word can bring with it different feelings and meanings. When in a battle setting troops would retreat to withdraw from danger or an overwhelming force. Oftentimes this would signal a defeat. So why in the world would we want to retreat? Why would a retreat be a good spiritual practice for us as Christians?

A spiritual retreat is a withdrawal but not from danger or from a defeat. It is not something that is forced upon us when there is no other option. It is a choice to withdraw to purposefully spend time to recharge and be restored. A retreat is a time to rest. And rest is not a retreat or withdrawal from purpose but to be restored for purpose.

In our scripture today Jesus and the disciples have been running on fumes. Jesus was traveling from village to village teaching. He sent out the twelve disciples with specific instructions. Earlier in this chapter, Mark 6:12-13 tells us, "they went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (Mark 6:12-13).

Our scripture picks up with the disciples returning to tell Jesus what they did. They were excited about what happened, but also exhausted. They wanted to share all the wonderful stories about what they were able to do - how God was working through them to do amazing things. But they were spent. In the midst of it all so many things were going on that they didn't even have a chance to eat and Jesus told them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (v. 31).

Jesus knew what was best for his disciples. He didn't want them to perform. He didn't want them to get back to work and help him with all the people that were coming and going. He knew they needed rest. And so he invited them to pause.

A healthy spiritual life requires a healthy rhythm. Yes, there is a time to go and to do, to work and serve, but there also needs to be a time to rest and recharge. Here in worship we use batteries a lot. Most of our microphones primarily function off of batteries. And so we bought rechargeable ones to make the mics function properly and make it so we don't have to keep buying an exorbitant amount of batteries. These batteries only work for so long before they have to get plugged back in to be recharged. Just like us. We can only go so far until we have to rest and get plugged back into the source of our power.

Many people equate busyness with faithfulness, effectiveness, or success. I am just as much a culprit of this as anyone else. I keep track of my hours - not that anyone really checks them. I want to make sure that I am doing what I am supposed to be doing and that I am putting in enough time each week. I must admit that when I go over my hours I almost use it as a badge of honor. "Look at how much I do." But in reality I need to use it as a way to keep myself accountable so that the weeks that I go over what is expected the next week I take more time to rest. Because it is not

sustainable to run and run and run without taking that time. Does it always work that way? No, but I'm trying because rest is important.

While many of our people are on retreat this weekend I will be taking a retreat next weekend. It will be a prayer retreat. Most of it will be in silence as I will be with a group practicing lectio divina which is a guided meditation on scripture. Because Jesus reminds us that it is not just about what we have done, it is not just recounting to him or to others the work we do for God, or how many hours we put in, but reconnecting with the one who sent us out into the world to do that work. We cannot pour out of what we do not have. We cannot give to others if we have not taken the time to receive it from God first.

During my time with hospice I would often tell caregivers that they would not be able to care for their loved ones if they did not take care of themselves in the process. They had to make sure that they were getting the rest they needed and the food and water they needed. Because if they wore themselves down to nothing someone would then need to take care of them AND their loved one.

Jesus knew this, and so in our scripture Jesus took the disciples and they went away by themselves to rest. They got in a boat and went off to a solitary place. But the people got excited about seeing Jesus and they congregated where they would finally end up. Which is part of the problem. You have a large crowd of people in a solitary place because Jesus and the disciples were trying to retreat. And as time passed people were getting hungry.

And I love Jesus - I mean I hope we all do. But I love what he does here. His disciples wanted him to disperse the crowd so they could find their own food. But again, they are in the middle of nowhere. And I love Jesus' response. He told his disciples, "You give them something to eat" (v. 37). The disciples were flabbergasted. Some translations say it would cost more than half a year's wages just to buy enough bread to feed that many people. That puts things into perspective doesn't it?

We see this story and we call it Jesus feeding the 5,000. Many of our Bibles would have this as the heading. But the scripture tells us that the number of men that were fed were 5,000. That doesn't count the women and the children. And I highly doubt Jesus only fed the men because Jesus was all about making sure the marginalized were cared for. So in reality, there could have been upwards of 10,000-15,000 people there. And Jesus performed a miracle. Jesus asked the disciples how much food they had. They found out that they had five loaves of bread and two fish. John's account of this story says that it was a boy's lunch. He had them sit down in groups and Jesus multiplied the food so that all had enough to eat.

This truly was a miracle. However some people try to explain it away saying that maybe as the baskets were passed around the groups people added in parts of their own lunch so that everyone had enough to eat. That they shared what they had so no one went hungry instead of hoarding it all for themselves. Regardless, I think it is just as big of a miracle if Jesus multiplied the food from five loaves of bread and two fish, or if 15,000 people shared what they had with each other.

Even in Jesus' exhaustion he saw the people in need and met them in their need, but he also made sure he met the needs of his disciples and met his own needs. The scripture tells us, "Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray" (v. 45-46). Immediately. The people had their fill and the

day was getting late. It takes some time to feed 15,000 people. So Jesus started sending people home while he sent the disciples off.

Can you imagine being one of the disciples and Jesus told you to leave? "Hey. I know you just came back from this trip where you did all these amazing things. I know you have a lot to tell me but you really couldn't because all these people were around. But I'm gonna send you away right now." You might have felt a little bewildered, maybe a little hurt. But just because Jesus sent them away it didn't mean he didn't want to be around them. He knew what was best for them. He knew they needed to go and be by themselves. Jesus knew they needed to get away from the work that always followed him. He knew they needed time to process things. Jesus also knew he needed time alone.

Sometimes we may feel distant from Jesus. We may feel like we got sent away or that we are not as close as we once were. Sometimes that is just because we need some space to process things on our own. It doesn't mean that God is not with us or that God doesn't care about us. It just means that we just don't always feel God's presence. There have been times in my life where I feel like God has led me down a specific path and then I came to an open field and I wasn't quite sure what direction my life was to take. I couldn't quite sense what God was calling me to, but that doesn't mean God wasn't with me. It just meant that God was giving me space to figure some things out—to explore myself and my faith a little further before carrying on.

And so Jesus released his disciples to go on ahead of him. It was a command to do so. He released them from the noise, the demand, and the distraction of all the things that were around them. They did not withdraw in defeat. In fact they were just a part of a wonderful miracle. They stepped back in obedience to take time to be alone and rest.

Have you ever tried to make yourself rest at home? How effective is that? You might say, "I'm going to sit here in my favorite chair and read." And then you remember that you have a pile of laundry that needs to be washed and so you grab the basket and start a load of laundry. Then walking by the sink you see a pile of dishes that need cleaned and so you wash them up. Going back to your chair you notice some dirt on the floor that needs to be cleaned up and so you grab the vacuum cleaner. And then when you put the vacuum cleaner away you notice that your shelves need to be reorganized. The next thing you know it is time to go to bed and you never read a single page of your book. How hard is it to spend purposeful time with God, especially when Satan doesn't want you to do it?

If you're anything like me, you start to pray - maybe for someone with an upcoming surgery this week - and then your mind jumps to your calendar and all the things that you have to do. And then maybe over to a grocery list and things you need to pick up on the way home from a doctor's appointment that you forgot about. And then you think about all of the other errands you have to run. And when your train of thought actually gets back on track your alarm is going off and you realize that you're going to be late for that appointment if you don't get moving.

Sometimes placing boundaries on our retreating is important. Jesus made his disciples get into a boat and leave the area so that they had no choice but to remove themselves from the distractions of the situation. Jesus removed himself to go up on the mountain side to pray. Our women's and men's retreats are going on at two of our church camps right. They are removed and in a space specifically designed to reconnect you with God. It is important that when we retreat to spend time with God - that we not

only create time to do so, but purposefully set aside space to do so as well. This helps remove the distractions that can get in our way.

What does it say about the importance of retreating that Jesus took the time to get away to spend with God? I mean he is God, so it's a little odd for us to think about it. But Jesus gives us the example of purposefully spending time alone with God - purposefully going off to pray with God. There are nine specific instances in scripture that tells us that Jesus was off by himself praying. (This does not include the times that the stories are duplicated in the different Gospels.) Sometimes he went out early in the morning. Sometimes it was after an event like this one. Luke 5:15-16 specifically tells us, "Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Jesus - all powerful Jesus - took time to recharge. And if Jesus did so, don't you think we should too?

I think one of the most profound things though for me in this scripture is that Jesus gives us this invitation for retreat. Yea, at the end he had to pretty much order his disciples into the boat and to go ahead of him. But I think that was instructions more than anything. But at the beginning of it all he said, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." Come with me. It's not like Jesus is just casting us out into the world and expecting us to figure things out for ourselves. He wants us to join him. He wants us to go where he is going. He wants us to join him on this spiritual journey of renewal.

And to be honest, it is not always easy to go where Jesus leads us. If you continue reading the scripture, it tells us that later that night they were in the middle of the lake and they were straining at the oars because the wind was against them. They were doing some hard work. But Jesus didn't leave them stranded, he walked out and met them. That invitation to spend time with Jesus is always open. As the disciples knew all too well the crowds would always be there. The work will always be there. There will always be more to do. But It is important to take time to replenish your soul. It is important to recharge.

When we rest in God's presence we help to rediscover our purpose. Schedule some sacred pauses, and worship is an easy way to start. But think about spending good quality time with God daily. Maybe a daily devotional or daily prayer time. It doesn't have to be much. And then be purposeful about taking a larger part of time to purposefully recharge with God occasionally. We have been having these retreats yearly. There are other retreats available as well that you can do on your own. But it does not have to be huge weekend trips. It can be as simple as some time of solitude and prayer. It could be a nature walk or a prayer walk. It could be a day trip somewhere to spend time with God. It could be something that we do as part of our small groups here at the church.

Regardless of what it is, it is important that we embrace rest as part of being a disciple of Christ. The goal of retreat is not to escape life. It is to encounter God, so that we can be recharged to re-enter into our lives restored and ready to serve again. Because when Jesus invites us to retreat with him and rest, we do not come away from our calling, we simply come away to renew our strength to fulfill our calling. So I encourage you to listen to Jesus' invitation to retreat. Find time to purposefully spend with Jesus. And as we find ourselves surrounded more and more by the loud chaos of the demands of this world, may we take the time to find our rest in Christ.