

REST AND RECOGNITION

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Recognizing that 17 or so different languages are spoken on Sunday morning in our United Methodist congregations in the conference, we become aware of the many immigrant populations that people the larger city. Even in smaller Glendale, we are increasingly aware of the many whose first language and often primary culture is different from that of the identified majority. Even the dual-language immersion experiences offered in local schools reveals the variety of people who now compose our community and neighborhoods.

Immigration has been part of our cityscape for generations and at least one of the doorways into society has been that of the church. Pastors who serve non-English speaking congregations know themselves to be more than preachers and teachers. They serve those who arrive from other countries in a number of ways, shepherding these new arrivals until they are able to sustain themselves without his assistance. We learn of pastors who greet at airports, house people in their homes, locate jobs, offer English language classes, arrange for apartments, and even bail out those who have been arrested as well as guide the immigrant through the complex system of visa, green cards, and even citizenship. It is an aspect of ministry that is not undertaken by those who do not serve the immigrant. And it is wearing, so much so that such pastors and their families discover themselves threatened by overwhelming stress.

Such people need rest. But the majority culture does not seem to support the fulfillment of such a need. We are generally a people who do not rest well. Though the human being does best with 8 hours' sleep each day or night, we undertake far less. Our world is alive with distractions that absorb rest time and there is rarely little quiet to encourage sleep. Poor patterns of rest may result in diminished health, both physical and mental. Regular lack of adequate rest and sleep may cause heart difficulties, less resistance to infection and even dementia as well as a multitude of illnesses that occur when our immune system is compromised. Therapies for a significant number of health problems are focused upon strengthening the body's ability to overwhelm debilitating diseases with the hypothesis that the body is naturally the best resource in good health, already equipped to heal itself if only given the time to do so.

Retreating from the ordinary stresses of life may provide the rest needed for restoration and more importantly, renewal. But vacations go untaken in a culture where competition suggests that one must focus ever more completely on the work for which one is paid, or another may be asked to take up such labors. Further, it may be that our images of vacation, supported if not created by advertising, have become so expensive that even considering and then planning for time away made add another layer of anxiety making it more difficult to perform vacation to meet expectation. Just as destination weddings require much especially the guests, destination vacations can be overwhelming, as we are invited, even encouraged to travel to other lands, sometimes those same lands from which immigrants come.

Jesus understood the need for rest and renewal. The gospels record accounts of Jesus withdrawing for prayer and rest and sometimes inviting his disciples to join him in this renewal. In the passage hear today, Jesus leads them to a deserted place where they might be able at least to sit and eat, something denied them by their constant interactions with people. A little later in the same chapter, we learn that Jesus and his disciples even crossed over to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, again hoping for time to relax and be refreshed.

But no matter how cleverly the small cohort attempts to find rest, many search them out to present needs of themselves and others. Jesus recognizes that these crowds are “like sheep without a shepherd.” Such an image of discipleship demands the constant attention of the shepherd who remains with the flock, even as they are spend the night in a sheepfold, safe from all that would harm them. Shepherding is much more than an occupation, it is more akin to a calling, no matter how the shepherd is engaged. As is clearly stated in another part of gospel, a shepherd is different in many ways from the hireling, one who serves the owner more than the sheep. It is the hired hand who cannot be counted on to remain with the flock when danger arises. It is he who would likely limit his willingness to care for his charge. Should one of the sheep wander off, the hired hand would likely merely report the loss to his master, celebrating that ninety-nine were still alive. The shepherd would leave the flock and search out the lost until all were restored to safety.

Even the title “pastor” reveals the image of shepherd over that of the nine-to-five employee. Little children who are more familiar with cows and horses than with church, often misspeak and possibly misunderstand the role of pastor speaking of the “pasture” instead as though the pastor was a fenced place where animals could eat grass. To be pastor is a vocation not an

occupation, a calling much more than a job, a person more than a place. And church is called to shepherding as well.

Recognizing that even shepherds need time for restoration and renewal, how do we balance such a need with the constant need of others? We may be tempted to simply hold fast to a schedule when the church would be open and help would be available, although the cell phone has done much to make the church available at all hours. We may even justify such control of time as we respect the time of the church's employees and further, and sometimes more importantly, by realizing that many situations are not really emergencies though they may be presented as such. Most can skip a meal or two, many have more resources than they may be willing to tap, including family members. Independence may need to give way to cooperation, at least temporarily. Personal choice may of necessity be replaced by concern for safety. As frustrating as it may be, drawing upon the abilities of others may suggest that we refer to those who are better able to serve.

Part of shepherding is understanding the resources that are available and knowing how to access them. According to the psalm, the shepherd leads the flock to places where they can feed and drink but the shepherd must know of such pastures and springs. This community abounds with people are trained and ready to assist those in need. Even those whose work is most focused on other the fulfillment of other community tasks are often able to offer responses to need. We are grateful to an education system that cares for the children beyond the sharing of knowledge. We can be glad that organizations, including Ascencia, Family Promise, and Communitas to raise up only a few of the many, are available to meet needs for housing and jobs, for financial assistance and food, for wisdom and listening. The police and city government are also ready to offer both long-term assistance and emergency help. It is our privilege to support some of these organizations but we may need to learn more about all that is available in order to respond to the needs of others. At the very least, we can offer the telephone number 211, a county-wide system staffed by people able to speak a multitude of languages who are ready to identify people and agencies in any particular zip code where help can be had. We cannot merely plead ignorance and walk away.

Shepherding will challenge us to be ready even as we seek rest, recognizing that need whether it be physical, mental, or spiritual does not often conform to any schedule. Crises do not wait though discomfort may not rise to the level of emergency. Such readiness will include being rested even as it prepares to respond to the unexpected. Those who serve others in

times of disaster are eager to do so, recognizing the need to pace themselves in their serving so that they may be continue to be fruitful in their work. Disaster response teams know the limits of their abilities and of their endurance and realize that if either is overextended, they will require more help than those whom they wish to serve. Often such teams may serve only one week before they must withdraw and allow others to take up ministry.

Rest is necessary for the body...and for the soul. In his life of prayer, Jesus models resting in God, renewal built upon trusting in God, listening to God's word, and opening himself to the strengthening and guiding of the Holy Spirit. By resting in God every time it was possible to do so prepared him to be both Christ of God and Lord for his disciples, shepherding them beyond their small dreams into the great vision of God.

One cannot deny the presence of "faithfulness" in the psalm that is our call to worship this morning. The repetition of the word itself testifies to its importance in understanding both the nature of God and God's call to the church. Resting in God offers opportunities to live in faith and it is this yearning to be faithful that causes us to ready ourselves to serve both with rest for ourselves and recognition that the need of others does not cease. In this way of Jesus, we become faithful, not for ourselves alone but for the world, not as individuals alone but as a congregation. Thanks be to God. Amen.