

Sunday, July 18, 2021
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 11 (Year B)

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2307190026081689>

(Sermon begins at about 23:40)

“Come Away to a Deserted Place”

I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Clergy are notoriously bad at self-care. We spend a lot of time talking about self-care at clergy gatherings. About the importance of taking care of ourselves; because if we don’t care for ourselves, we will not have what is needed to care for our parishioners. Discussions about self-care include the full spectrum of health and wholeness: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. A lot of these discussions invariably come around to the need for boundaries; the need for maintaining a balance between our work lives and our personal lives (yes, clergy do have personal lives outside of the parish). And despite all the talk, very little changes.

Personally, I have always been bad at self-care, even before I became a priest. Not all aspects of self-care. But certainly, in terms of the balance between my work and my personal life. But as I’ve grown older and gained more experience in ministry, I recognize more and more the wisdom of, the need for, better self-care. The wisdom of and need for a better balance between work and personal life. However, recognizing and doing are two completely different things. Sometimes it takes extraordinary circumstances to drive the reality home. To cause one to take action. A “wake-up call,” as they say.

This pandemic we are in has served as one of those wake-up calls for me. Particularly early on, but continuing throughout this time of pandemic, the level of work and activity has been heavier than before. Partially because of having to continually figure out new ways of doing things. Partly because of the additional things we have added to the schedule to keep all of you engaged and connected even while unable to be together physically. The constant concern for the health and well-being of all our parishioners. The sometimes mind-numbing work of trying to keep up with an ever-changing set of rules and regulations regarding what we can and cannot do because of safety concerns. The list goes on, but you get the idea.

With all of this as a backdrop, early in the pandemic I was talking to my spiritual director and told him that I am becoming increasingly aware of just how out of balance my life is and that I was really feeling a need for creating a more balanced life. Good for me, right? Well, my spiritual director proceeded to burst my bubble. Sort of. He told me that having a balanced life is a myth. A fallacy. That particularly in ministry, it is just unrealistic to think that one could achieve a truly balanced life. No matter how hard one may try for balance, ministry can throw a monkey wrench into our best laid plans. Your whole day, your whole week, can change with a phone call. A pastoral emergency, a death, can upend one’s day or week, or even several weeks. Priorities need to be shifted to accommodate the new demands. Things may need to be rescheduled. Extra time is generally needed to accommodate the new list of things that need to

be done. And where does the time come from? From personal time, immediately throwing off any semblance of balance. Similarly, there are times of the year that are just busier than others. Holy Week and Easter. Christmas. All requiring additional planning, additional preparation, additional time for all the extra services. But then, there are other times when life is more manageable – summer when not as much is going on and the pace of work slows a bit, making some semblance of balance more achievable.

Since true balance is not achievable, what do we do? The best we can really hope for is a “healthy rhythm” – doing the best we can to take care of ourselves in the midst of whatever conditions we find ourselves. Recognizing that things are ever changing, that they can change at a moment’s notice, or with no notice at all. It’s about changing our mindset to be flexible. To find those times—to make those times—for self-care, in the midst of an ever-changing schedule and workload.

This does not just apply to clergy. Most people experience similar conditions in their everyday lives. Juggling work life, family life, and personal life. And throw on top of that the demands of whatever parish ministries you may be involved in—be it one ministry or lots of ministries—and the possibility for a balanced life just goes out the window. Because the same thing that draws people into ordained ministry also draws people into lay ministry—the fervent desire to serve God and care for God’s people. And it is that same fervent desire to serve that, if we are not careful, can lead to burnout.

Jesus recognized that trying to have a balanced life while doing God’s work was not always easy or even possible. Which means that having at least a healthy rhythm is all the more important. This is what Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel reading. He and the disciples have been through a busy period. Jesus has been keeping a hectic schedule of preaching, teaching, and healing. So much so that we are told several places in the Gospels that he could hardly rest or even find time to eat. Meanwhile, the disciples have returned from their mission, where Jesus sent them out in pairs to teach and to heal and to cast out demons. Upon their return, the disciples excitedly tell Jesus about all they have done. It is obvious to him that they have been very busy and are, like him, tired and in need of a break. “He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while’” (Mk 6.31a).

Jesus takes them to a deserted place. A more appropriate translation would be “a wilderness place.” In scripture, wilderness places are often places of growth and development. Places and times of preparation. When the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, preparing them to enter the Promised Land and to begin a new life there. When Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism, in preparation for his public ministry. And how in the midst of a busy work schedule, Jesus would periodically go away to a deserted place to pray (Mk 1.35). So, the image of going away to a deserted place serves two purposes. One is to provide a time of rest. But along with that comes preparation for whatever comes next. Not only through rest, but by providing an opportunity to step back and to reflect. A time to learn from what has happened before as a way of being better prepared for what is to come.

As often happens, Jesus’ best laid plans get upended. Just as he and the disciples find a deserted place, instead of rest and relaxation, they get thrown into a classic ministry situation.

While not included in today's reading, what happens is that they go to a deserted place, but people follow them, wanting to hear Jesus preach, wanting to be healed. And rather than deny them, Jesus has compassion on those who followed him there, leading to the feeding of the 5,000. Yep, things can change on a moment's notice. Sometimes you just have to set aside your plans and personal desires and do the ministry that presents itself, which is what Jesus models. This Gospel scene shows the difficulty of making time and space for getting away to a deserted place. It shows the need for flexibility even while trying to create and maintain a healthy rhythm. It shows the need for taking time away to go to a deserted place so that one is prepared when life and ministry unexpectedly happen.

I have a friend, colleague, and mentor who literally goes away to a deserted place as part of his regular routine. On his days off, he goes camping in the desert. This time away from all other obligations help him to prepare mentally, physically, and spiritually for the rigors of ministry the rest of the week. His time away allows him—when back in civilization—to be totally focused on his ministry, giving it his all, until time rolls around for another foray into the wilderness.

Literally going away to a deserted place is not always possible. So, it then becomes about finding ways to get away from the demands of daily life in some way that suits the needs of the individual. There are a variety of ways to get away to a deserted place. It does not even have to be going to a physical place. The deserted place is more of a metaphor or image for separating oneself from the everyday grind, from the stresses of one's work or other obligations. Even if one loves what one does, you still need a break from it from time to time. Time to recharge. Time to think about something else. Or to think about nothing at all. Time to engage in other activities. In the long run, doing so allows for people to be more energized, leading to being more productive, more efficient, more creative. And to allow time to connect with God unencumbered by distractions.

In many ways, this time of pandemic has been something like a deserted place. For me, it has proved to be the deserted place that I needed to start working on developing a healthier rhythm for my life and ministry. This time has allowed the flexibility and the space to work on developing a healthy rhythm without having to literally go away to a deserted place. Working at home and not having to commute to work and not having to drive all over creation to meetings has given me more usable time in my day. Initially, that time was taken up with even more work. But I quickly realized that if I was going to create a healthy rhythm, I needed to use the extra time afforded by the lockdown conditions for self-care as opposed to adding more items to my to do list. Over the last year, my rhythm has indeed become healthier. About the middle of the day, I take a break and go for a two to three mile walk. While I have always had some time in my daily routine for prayer, I have added more time for prayer—the Morning and Evening Prayer services we do online, but also additional time for personal prayer and reflection. One thing I had always wanted to do was get into a habit of doing centering prayer every day as opposed to just periodically when we do it at church. Now centering prayer has become part of my daily routine. I have made time—not every day, but most days—for personal reading. And while all these things take additional time—time that I could be using for other work—what I find is that these moments of going away to a deserted place, be it physical or metaphorical, gives me the space I need to recharge, to refocus, and sometimes gives me a fresh perspective. Rather than having to work harder or longer when I do get back to work, I

find that I am more productive, and often more creative, than if I just powered through all day without taking time to get away to my own deserted place. And I find I feel more connected with God, because I have made space for God to be present in my life. Because I have made time to be present to God.

Perhaps this time of pandemic has given you some insights into how to rearrange your life to provide for the deserted places you need to have a more balanced life, to have a healthier rhythm. If not, I invite you—I encourage you—to heed the advice of our Lord: “Come away to a deserted place,” whatever that looks like for you, “and rest a while.” I promise it will be time well spent.