

Sunday, July 21, 2024
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11B)

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/7879897175435096>

(Sermon begins at about 22:10)

“Come Away and Rest a While”

Some of my fondest memories as a child were of the time our family spent together on weekends. During the week, we were all busy with our own lives and activities. My father worked Monday through Friday. My sister and I were in school during the week. And Mom was a stay-at-home mother and housewife, so was busy throughout the week with keeping a household of four (five counting the family dog) running smoothly. But all that came to a screeching halt on the weekends when we shifted gears into a more relaxed routine. Of course, there was a certain amount of “work” that needed to be done on the weekends. My sister and I had homework—although I generally tried to get it done on Friday afternoon so that I could have the weekend free. And depending on the time of the year, there was yard work, which involved all members of the family with their appointed tasks. And even though it was work, we were together.

When there was not the obligatory yard work or other errands that had to be done, we would go on Saturday outings. Generally, this entailed day trips to various historic sites or other places of particular interest. Since we moved around a lot, there were always new places to explore; and once we found our favorites, places to return to. And quite often, Mom would fix a big picnic lunch, complete with fried chicken or pimento cheese sandwiches, potato salad or assorted chips, home-baked cookies, and other family favorites. I think sometimes we looked forward to the picnic lunch more than visiting the sights. We always had a wonderful time seeing new or even old favorite places, learning new things, eating good food, spending time together, and making family memories. And then, of course, Sunday was devoted to church in the morning, a family brunch afterwards, with the rest of the day relaxing at home. All in preparation for the regular round of work, housework, and school that loomed ahead in the week to come.

At the time, as a child, I did not realize or appreciate the importance of what we were doing on the weekends. I did not know there was a term for what we were doing: Sabbath. If you Google “sabbath” you will get a definition something along the lines of “a day of religious observance and abstinence from work, kept by Jewish people from Friday evening to Saturday evening, and by most Christians on Sunday.” This is the technical, Judeo-Christian definition and understanding of sabbath. But sabbath carries a broader meaning; one that is not necessarily related to or focused on worship. Nor does one’s sabbath time have to be on the designated day of worship. Any intentional time devoted to rest and renewal is sabbath time.

Our Gospel reading for today highlights this broader definition of sabbath. And the implied need for sabbath. As we heard in the Gospel two weeks ago, Jesus had sent the twelve disciples

out in pairs to engage in ministry: to preach the Gospel of repentance, to heal the sick, and to cast out demons. As we hear in the opening of today's Gospel reading, the disciples are back and excited to tell Jesus "all that they had done and taught." Jesus recognizes, both from his own ministry experiences and what he was hearing from his disciples, that the ministry they were doing was hard work. They need a bit of a break. A chance to recharge before they move on to their next ministry opportunity. He says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." The getting away was a key part. As Mark tells us "many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." There was so much need for ministry that the only way they were going to be able to truly rest and unwind, to truly recharge their batteries, would be to get away from it all. Which is what they do. They set out in a boat and travel to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Unfortunately, when they get to their intended destination, they are met with a crowd of people in need of being ministered to. What ensues, although omitted from today's reading, is the account of the feeding of the five thousand. At the end of their work there, Jesus again sends the disciples on ahead to start their sabbath time while he stays and wraps up with the five thousand. Once again, they get in a boat, trying to head off to a place where they can be alone and relax a little. As we hear, once again, they were met with more crowds in need of healing. They just could not catch a break.

While the disciples never get their time away (at least this time), one of the key points of the story is that Jesus really is trying to provide his disciples with some much-needed sabbath rest. He repeatedly sends them off on sabbath, only to have plans thwarted by the relentless needs of ministry. Jesus' repeated attempts to provide sabbath for his disciples is certainly based on his own experience and theology of sabbath. The Gospels contain numerous accounts of Jesus taking time away following particularly busy and grueling periods of ministry. Sometimes by himself and sometimes with the disciples. While devoted to his ministry, Jesus nonetheless recognizes the importance of time for rest and renewal.

As the Son of God, sabbath was, after all, part of his being: "God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from the work that he had done in creation." (Gen 2.2-3). This concept of sabbath rest became encoded in the Ten Commandments: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work" (Ex 20.8-10b). This time of sabbath is commanded by God, recognizing the importance of rest and renewal. In the Jewish Law, this concept of sabbath even extended to the land: "When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard" (Lev 25.2-4).

So this concept of sabbath rest is an integral part of the Jewish tradition and, by extension, of our own Christian tradition. As a result, our own labor practices and laws incorporate time for sabbath rest, whether we use that term or not. Recognition that no matter how much we might enjoy the work we do, we need an occasional break. We need time to rest and recharge so that

we are able to continue our work on an ongoing basis. Of course, whether we actually take the necessary time off is an entirely different matter. Whether we use the time to actually provide rest and renewal is an entirely different matter. Suffice it to say, our entire religious and cultural systems, going back as far as we can remember, incorporate and even command the taking of sabbath time. Often placed in the context of time for worship, but also incorporating time for rest. For doing those things that renew, recharge, and reenergize us. For reconnecting with the God who is the source of the strength that allows us to work in the first place.

In ministry, we often talk about the necessity for sabbath. Recognizing that if we do not take regular times for rest and renewal, we will not have the energy and personal resources needed to actually engage in the ministry we are called to do. That if we are not taking care of ourselves, we are not in a position to take care of others. In many churches, including The Episcopal Church, times of sabbath are strongly encouraged, if not actually mandated. As in most professions, there are standard provisions for weekly sabbath time (i.e., regular days off), as well as annual vacation time. In addition, we have a provision for another form of sabbath time: the sabbatical—a more extended time of sabbath, if you will. Although slightly different in nature.

Given our Gospel reading with its theme of sabbath time, I want to take this opportunity to notify our parish of my own developing plans for sabbatical. Standard practice in our Diocese is for priests to take two weeks of sabbatical time for every year of service, up to six years; with eligibility for sabbatical to be taken after the fifth year. In November, I will have been with you for eight years and still have not taken my sabbatical. In a word, I am long overdue. The delay has largely been due to the inconvenience of the pandemic. However, on advice of clergy wellness professionals at the CREDO conference I attended in April, and in consultation with our Vestry, we have determined that I will take a three-month sabbatical (the time designated in my contract) beginning sometime after Easter of next year. I am still in the process of planning what my sabbatical time will look like, but as time goes on, I will provide you with more information.

To date, I have been doing some reading on best-practices surrounding clergy sabbatical, talking to clergy colleagues, and forming my own ideas of what I want and need for my sabbatical. Not unlike what Jesus was trying to provide for his disciples, sabbatical is time away from active parish ministry. As one book I recently read notes: “sabbatical is a ‘spiritual renewal leave.’ It is a time of purposeful ceasing, resting and planned refreshment, with a spiritual renewal component or emphasis. The leave accomplishes a purpose and specific intent: to renew and restore vitality and health—spiritual, emotional and physical—in spiritual leaders.”¹ As I have come to realize in my own thinking, praying, and consultation on the matter, sabbatical is really about reconnecting with those things and activities that energize me in my life and my ministry. Things that, for a variety of reasons, through the course of my ministry have been pushed to the margins if not to the back of the closet.

It is important to note that while sabbatical is about rest and renewal, it is not an extended vacation. It is a time to be intentional in renewing and strengthening my relationship with God and with my own sense of call and vocation. The result of the time away, regardless of what that entails, will hopefully be renewed energy, motivation, and insights to strengthen and

revitalize my ministry here at St. Gregory's. This time of sabbatical will not just be a benefit to me, but will also ultimately be a benefit to our parishioners and our parish as a whole.

All that said, this time will also be, in a way, a sabbatical for the parish. No, that does not mean you can take a break from church. The work of ministry still continues. But the time of sabbatical, under the leadership of your Vestry and with the pastoral support of other clergy, will be a time for the parish to explore those things and activities that similarly reconnect you with God. To explore what might revitalize St. Gregory's in its common life and ministry. A time to play, to experiment, to try new things. With the goal that when our collective sabbatical time is through, we will be reunited as priest and parish with a renewed sense of who God is calling us to be in this place and how we are being called to better engage in ministry in our community.

As I said, this is still a work in progress, and will be for the next nine months or so. But I did want to at least bring you into the conversation, to give you time to start thinking about what this sabbatical time might be like for you personally and for our parish. I intend to give a more detailed report on sabbatical preparations at our Annual Meeting next year.

In the meantime, ministry continues. For all of us. There are always things to be done. There are always those in need of hearing the Gospel proclaimed in word and action. It is easy to become bogged down, to become overwhelmed, to feel wiped out. But Jesus has a corrective: "Come away . . . and rest a while." For our own sake and the sake of our ministries, we would do well to regularly accept his invitation.

¹ David C. Alves, *A Sabbatical Primer for Pastors: How to Initiate and Navigate a Spiritual Renewal Leave* (Concord, NH: Paupakpress, 2014), 29.