

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's – Lafayette Hill, PA
July 19, 2009

“Come, rest a while”

During college I was a member of a Bible study group. One month we decided to study Luther's Small Catechism. We had gotten to the point in our spiritual lives, our Lutheran lives to actually want to understand and know about all of that stuff we were supposed to be paying attention to in Confirmation class. So, for a whole month we studied the Ten Commandments, the creeds, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments. During our study of the Ten Commandments our leader posed a question to us: “What commandment is the most difficult to keep?” Our leader obviously wasn't asking us this question because she had statistics on which commandment society broke the most. No, she was asking us, individually, personally, which commandment did we struggle with the most. For me it was the fourth commandment. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

Dorothy Bass, a professor at Valparaiso University wrote a book a few years ago entitled: *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. In this book she describes the fourth commandment as the Rodney Dangerfield of the ten commandments; the only one out of the ten that gets little or no respect. She says: “I was out to dinner with my husband and another couple, and we were whining about all the papers we were going to be grading together on Sunday, sort of whining, but also sort of boasting. It just sort of hit me that with any of the other commandments we would not be sitting around whining: ‘Gee, I've got to commit adultery tomorrow.’”

It's difficult to rest. In today's society it's almost taboo to rest. We are surrounded with technology that keeps us connected to work, to family, to friends. We live in a time where we are expected to answer our cell phones at all times and in all places. We are expected to return emails within minutes of receiving them. On our days off from work, if we are blessed to have such a day, we are expected to clean the house, do the grocery shopping, finish projects around the house, run kids here and there...

When we do have the opportunity to actually go on vacation, those days aren't filled with much rest either.

One of my friends from Ohio recently returned from vacation. She and her husband and their two young children went down to Disney World for a week. She called me when she got back and said, “Stephanie I feel like I need a vacation to recover from my vacation.” She then told me how her family just went non-stop for a whole seven days. They went to this theme park and that theme park. They scheduled lunches and dinners at different restaurants with different theme park characters. They went to theme park parades, and shows, and fireworks displays. They didn't sleep in one single morning because they wanted to make sure they could fit every single thing possible into their week. They didn't have time to rest even on their vacation.

With our on the go, busy lifestyles when we **do** actually get a break in our jam packed schedules we often don't rest, we may even feel guilty about resting. We think we need to fill that empty slot with a trip to the gym, or we really need to clean that linen closet out... Forget about whole days of rest, we barely allow ourselves moments of rest!

It seems as though Jesus and his disciples also struggled with setting aside time to rest. Jesus had sent the disciples out in pairs to share in his mission. The disciples traveled around preaching that people should repent. They cast out demons. They anointed the sick with oil and healed them. The disciples were very, very busy. The gospel even says that they were so busy that they had no time even to stop and eat. Jesus realized their exhaustion, realized how busy they had been, realized that their work had been hard and said to them "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." And so they did. They got into a boat with Jesus to rest. The disciples needed a time of quiet to renew their tired spirits. They needed a time of quiet to renew their relationship with Jesus.

If you read on in the gospel of Mark, you will see that Jesus and the disciples didn't get much of a vacation. Once they got to the deserted place that Jesus had invited them to, it was not deserted at all but instead a great crowd had gathered. Jesus did not send the crowd away, telling them that he and the disciples needed a break. No, he got out of the boat and began to teach. He taught for quite some time until it was late in the day. Now what happened next is left out of today's gospel. But it is one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament. Many of you probably remember it. The feeding of the 5,000. The disciples encouraged Jesus to send the people away so they could find something to eat but Jesus told the disciples to feed the people. In that whole group of 5,000 people there were only five loaves of bread and two fish. The disciples took those five loaves and two fish after Jesus had blessed them and managed to feed every single person that was gathered. Those people, the disciples witnessed a miracle that day. They witnessed God's abundant gifts.

At Union Theological one of the requirements for the Master's of Divinity degree is to take three credits of a World Religion course. There are only four classes you can take to fulfill this requirement. The class that I chose was Zen Meditation. (The reason I chose this class was not because I was really in to meditation nor was I even very interested in it. But, I chose this class because I knew there weren't any large research papers to do.) Zen Meditation met every Monday through Thursday. 7 AM to 8 AM. For a whole semester. Every morning I practiced sitting meditation with seven other students and our professor. Sitting meditation is not easy. First of all, you have to sit perfectly still on a cushion for 45 minutes. Not the most comfortable thing in the world especially when your body is used to being on the move all the time. Second, you aren't supposed to think when meditating. At all. If something comes into your mind you acknowledge it and then you are supposed to let it leave your thoughts, you're not supposed to dwell on it.

This is quite difficult. It takes a lot of practice to actually sit through a whole forty-five minutes without moving and without thinking. A lot. As we moved through the semester I began to see that these 45 minutes were such a gift. This class forced me to rest. And in this resting I experienced something wonderful. You see, when you're not thinking about what you have to get done for the day, when you're mind isn't worrying about task after task, when you can just be. Just be. In this resting I was able to witness miracles to experience God's gifts. When you're not moving and not thinking for 45 minutes the most random memories pop into your head. One morning when I was meditating a beautiful scene came into view. I was at my grandparent's house, in the backyard with my grandfather, it was fall and we were watching squirrels steal peanuts off of a tree stump. My grandfather had died almost ten years before. It was something I hadn't thought about in years and yet it was so very clear to me at that moment. It was almost like I was there. I told my professor about this memory and she referred to it as a cookie – something sweet that encourages your meditation. I believe that I was renewing my relationship with Jesus. Jesus was speaking to my heart as I rested, showing me the miracles, the gifts in my life. The gift of family. The gift of love. The gift of life.

We spend so many of our moments working and working hard trying to make things good. Good for us, good for our families. But when we rest we have the chance to see the goodness that already is, the miracles that surround us. The gifts that God has given us.

Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while. Amen.