

“Did Jesus Ever Take a Vacation?”

Neil Engle
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Text: Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

I mentioned last week the time I spent in Sheridan, Wyoming, while serving as Associate Pastor of First Christian Church. When we moved there in 1982, I quickly discovered that the congregation saw itself as basically a nine-month church. You see, Sheridan is located on the edge of the Big Horn Mountains. September through May, the congregation offered one Sunday morning worship service at 10:45. But during the summer months, the church offered an additional service at 8:30 to accommodate those persons who wished to spend the day in the mountains. I had no problem with that. I believe in offering options. I believe the church can be flexible and adaptable when it comes to ministries and programs. What didn't set well with me was when the chairperson of the Christian Education committee informed me that since she had a cabin in the mountains, she would not be in worship during the summer. She also made it very clear that if having Sunday school classes during the summer was important to me, then it was going to be up to me to put all that together because she was taking the summer off. She was on vacation. When you hear that word “vacation,” what pops into your mind? Is the idea of a vacation a stress reducer or a stress producer? Does a vacation conjure up scenes of lounging, relaxing, and resting, or are they images of driving, hurrying, worrying?

Did Jesus ever get to take a vacation? Did He take a day off during the week? Today's scripture reading is found in all the gospels, with minor differences. Matthew relates this retreat to Jesus hearing of the death of John the Baptist; whereas Luke, with no explanation for the action, says that Jesus and the disciples withdrew to the city of Bethesda. In this brief passage, Mark tells us about the twelve, the crowds, and Jesus. As for the twelve, the portrait here is favorable, somewhat more for Mark. You'll recall from two weeks ago, the disciples had been sent out in pairs to be an extension of the ministry of Jesus. Well, they're back from their mission trip. They must have met with some success, because there's much they want to tell Jesus. I can just see the disciples gathering around Jesus, clamoring for His attention. “Oh, oh, Jesus . . . It's my turn to talk.” “Master, Master.”

They did what they were sent to do, and Mark uses the word apostles here upon their return. They went on a mission as “the twelve,” as the disciples, but when they completed their assignment, they were called apostles, a new title signifying a new relationship with Jesus. Nowhere else in the Gospel does Mark refer to them by that term.

So they gave a full report to Jesus – if they'd had digital cameras and power point back then, no doubt the apostles would have used them to give Jesus the full picture. Jesus knows what the apostles need now. He says to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Jesus and His disciples, who usually help others, now need to take time for themselves. They need a break. They need a vacation.

You know, I believe it is no accident that a text such as this is included for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost in the lectionary – our three-year cycle of Scriptures. It never fails that every year there is included a text that proclaims the need for rest. One year it's this text from Mark; another year it's the words of Jesus in Matthew: “Come to me all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” The third year we hear the story of Mary and Martha and the need to sit and rest at the feet of Jesus. It's almost as if those who put together this whole cycle of scriptures knew that by this time of the year we're ready for a break – especially in the midst of record-breaking temperatures. Most of us are probably in need of a rest.

Now it would be easy for me to apply today's text from Mark in the same way as the other two I just mentioned, and suggest that we need a rest to renew our relationship with God or to seek out the burden-lifting power of Jesus. In fact, one resource I consulted encouraged preachers to present this Mark passage as calling for “down time” that could be used as “up time” with God. In other words we should take a break from our schedules to work on our spiritual life. We may indeed need to spend more time – up time – with God. Now we may very well need to take our heavy loads to Jesus and find spiritual rest. We may need to do all that. But that's not what this text is calling us to be about. Jesus doesn't say “Let's go away to a deserted place so we can spend time in prayer.” He doesn't say “Let's take a break so that I can squeeze in another lesson or tell you some more parables.” He doesn't say any of that. He says “Let's get out of Dodge and take a siesta. Let's blow this pop stand and go for a mini-vacation. Let's take a break. You and I need some rest.”

Jesus was ahead of His time as a master multi-tasker, and His days were compressed with compassion. But He knew the value of rest. Maybe He came by that wisdom naturally. After all, Scriptures tell us that on the seventh day of creation, even God needed rest. So do we from time to time. Our sputtering hearts, our reeling heads, our dragging feet, from time to time they all need to receive a new sense of well-being.

It's dangerous theology to think we can improve on God. As a matter of fact, there is something prideful about our reluctance to rest more often. We know however, that our society pushes to work nonstop 24-7. We now have the technology to work at home and on vacation. Haven't at least two of the latest privacy/security/personal information thefts been related to employees who took work home with them? Our push for production is constant. Listen to the observations of Diana Roome in an article entitled, "What's Wrong with Using the V Word?"

Though I've lived in the United States for almost two decades, I still think like a European when it comes to vacations. It's not just the yearning for Alpine and Mediterranean destinations, but the fact that in Europe, for the most part, four weeks of paid vacation a year is mandatory and six weeks customary.

European friends report on their minor and major breaks which allow them to retreat with a stack of books . . . , trek [the region] on horseback and still get away to ski. . . . One London sportswriter repairs regularly to his house near the Pyrenees. . . . Seven weeks' respite allows him to return to work brimming with energy. In the United States, by contrast, employers seldom give more than 10 days' paid vacation. . . .

It has been hard to break this habit of shortchanging our personal lives. I can count on one hand the number of vacations my family has taken together which lasted more than a week. . . .

Meanwhile, the effects of vacation starvation are all around me. For many people I know, 50 weeks of the year are used up in a blind struggle to get to work, retain a foothold and move upward. At home, essentials of family maintenance – paying bills, helping kids with homework – take up the little time left. There's hardly a spare hour for pursuits that remind people they are more than corporate ciphers.

While our economy may be thriving, we are not. Marriages are starved of time. Children hardly ever see their parents unhurried and unharried. Anger, depression, exhaustion and stress-related illness are epidemic.

Yet the V word is almost never mentioned as a solution. Like sleep (another commodity we don't get enough of), vacation is a remedy without harmful side effects. But because it's considered an indulgence, it doesn't fit well in our busier-than-thou culture. It's fine to want more money, but there is something shameful about asking for more time. Anyone who fears the company can't function without him is plagued by the equally insidious fear that it can.

Of course, the spirit of hard work is part of what has made America great. But there is another side to that coin. Americans, who consider themselves the freest people on earth, shackle themselves to their jobs, in the process giving up the most basic of human rights: time to be who they are.

We 21st Century disciples of Jesus must recognize and recapture the need for rest. Now how we rest will be different for each one of us. As one writer says: "Some people rest by walking, or visiting, or reading, or playing. Rest means being free to just be." But we all can find that deserted place – it is a place where we are refreshed and renewed – it is a place where long books are read, and movies watched and naps taken, and roads explored, and prayers offered, and deep thoughts pondered. It is a place of Sabbath-keeping and rest, renewal and relaxation, silence and inspiration. And remember – the demands of the village and cities and farms and classrooms and offices will always be waiting for us, as they were for Jesus. When His retreat was interrupted, Jesus didn't rebuke the crowd but had compassion on them. It doesn't take long for people to find us and expect us to work miracles – in real time – right now! But returning from the deserted place, we'll find ourselves full of serenity, strangely stronger and ready to roll up our sleeves and do good and faithful work. We'll get the job done, whether it's healing or high tech hardware repair. And after our time away – after our rest – after our vacation, we'll probably do that job better and more peacefully.

O God, help us follow the example set by you and your Son, Jesus. In whatever manner is best, let us rest. Amen.