

Jesus and the Quiet
Mark 6.30-34, 53-56
Pentecost +8
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The pastors I most admire tend to be the ones who put down roots and stay a long while without urgency or anxiety of what is to come next. You're not in a hurry when you settle in to share life for as long as the call might last. When culture is increasingly mobile and one job leads to the next job, to stay put and invest one's life in a group of people requires a push-back against the notion that the better life is just 5-7 years down the road. In the church of my childhood, these long-tenured pastorates were all I knew. I grew up with the legacy of Dr. Howard M. Reaves who joined the First Baptist Church of Mobile in 1948 and remained in the congregation as Pastor Emeritus. He sat regally but quietly in the front, right corner of the sanctuary every Sunday morning as Dr. James F. Walters preached. The two of them, with one other pastor in between, touched seven decades in the story of that congregation.

In recent days, I have thought about the social climates they faced, spanning 1948-2005, as they prepared to step into the pulpit each week. The height of the post-WWII church boom as old buildings were overflowing and new buildings were being constructed. Equality for women, equality for African-Americans, a deadly war with no clear end, citizens ready for change and something new...something more than the church of the 1950s could offer. The steady takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, a shift in identity, the early signs of church decline. Cold War, terrorism, Middle Eastern conflict, the AIDS epidemic. The end of Southern Baptist life for churches like ours, a shifting landscape for mainline protestant churches, thinking of ourselves as mainline protestants instead of evangelicals, disfellowship from associations, termination of membership from Convention. A recession, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War. Increasing conversation in the church about how congregations will welcome gay and lesbian members, continued support for female clergy, 9/11, two wars, Katrina, a financial crisis.

I began compiling this list as I thought to myself over the past few days, "What a time in history to become a pastor of a church!" In less than 24 months as pastor, we have named in prayer countless deaths by lone shooters, tragedies in police encounters at the hands of police and the hands of criminals. Nepal, Syria, Ferguson, New York, North Charleston, Charleston, Chattanooga. We know the stories attached to the places. We have asked many of the same questions that previous generations have asked, "How long, oh Lord?" and "What can we do? How can we respond?" We meet, we pray, we grow hopeful, we grow weary.

Every generation faces local, national, and international challenges, but the constant connection of social media and 24-hour news cycle contributes to a cultural compassion fatigue. Even on a regular day, studies show that hours in front of a computer screen

changes our breathing. One researcher calls it “screen apnea” because we literally hold our breath as we stare at the glowing images before us. Add to that phenomenon the string of violent stories we are naming and lamenting, and it’s no wonder we reach the limit of how much we can process, hold, and react. How long can we care before we grow numb? How much violence and grief can we absorb before we are like saturated sponges that simply cannot take in any more bad news? The task of faith communities like ours, in these times like these, is not to shrink back or give up but to somehow live into the truth we affirm.

We’re now week three in Mark chapter 6. Jesus has given the disciples instructions to go out as apostles and preach, teach, baptize, heal, bless. He’s told them to shake the dust off their feet when they aren’t welcome and move onto the next town. Things were off to a great start, then there’s this talk of Jesus being too much like John the Baptizer. And we’re told of the grisly end that John met because he spoke too much truth to too much power. And somehow the specter of John’s head on that platter is now in the heads of these apostles, and they make their way back to Jesus with burdens in their hearts and on their faces.

What a time in history to become an apostle of Jesus Christ! Pressure to bend to the whims of the Roman government, risk of arrest or death for opposition, starting a reformation within their first century religious tradition, constant crowds begging for more—more healing, more teaching, more blessing, more presence.

John is dead. The apostles first journey out in teams is done. And the disciples go running. They run straight to Jesus, and he knows what they all need—rest. Jesus takes them away to a quiet place because it’s in the quiet place that they remember who they are. It’s in the quiet that they hear God’s reminder of their calling. It’s in the quiet moment that they remember they have options: they can hide from Herod in fear or they can move from their steady center of calling. So he invites them into the boat to get away from it all for a while because he knows that feeling. Jesus grows weary, too. Jesus goes off to a quiet place, too.

Artist and author Jan Richardson is known for her reflections on the spiritual life and sabbath practices. She writes, “I do not know what restores you, where you take your rest, how you find the sustenance that enables you to meet those who wait for you with their insistent hungers. But whatever it is, whatever soothes you and brings you solace, may you find it in the rhythm of this day, as close as the beating of your heart, as quiet as the space between the beats.”¹

This is what they want: restoration, rest, sustenance, solace. They are ready. Surely they climb into the boat and exhale. They are glad they’re not out in those teaching pairs anymore but back together in a group. They’re glad Jesus is back to taking charge and not sending them out again. They’re settling into this relaxing, breathing thing. They’re starting

¹ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/07/15/come-away-and-rest/>

to feel their own hearts beat. And that “quiet...space between the beats” is about all they are going to get.

He takes them away to a deserted place, so busy they haven't even eaten. This is when we expect a lesson on how to pray, how to be still, how to nourish the body and the soul. But the need follows them. Not only have people come to recognize Jesus and his friends, they know their routine and where to find them next. So as the group heads off in the boat to the deserted place by themselves, the crowd takes off for the destination to wait. Jesus is rowing a boat, and people are jogging along the shore shouting, “I'll meet you there Jesus! You take your time. I'll just wait. The usual place? The quiet one? I'll be waiting!”

This is when you and I would scream. This is when we would call time and say “ENOUGH” and put a closed sign on the front door. We'd find a NEW deserted place where no one can find us. Not Jesus. Jesus sees them waiting and is filled with compassion for them.

He teaches them just like he teaches the disciples. And he feeds them just as he feeds the disciples. And he spends more time with them, gives more of himself to them, and he allows them to reach out to him for what they need. Maybe it's because they've all ended up in the deserted place that they can identify what they each need. Everyone who is gathered there has left home and routine to draw near to Jesus. He shows them all how to sit and listen and consider. In this story, there seems to be a spiritual longing from the people and not some of the physical longings as in other stories. Jesus teaches first and feeds second. Perhaps he's giving them all the same lesson about who God is and who God has created them to be, about how the world is and how God wants it to be. Maybe he's adding the crowd to the sabbath day and giving them all a moment's rest. Maybe they're all finding themselves in that space between the beats.

To be sure, we read in Mark's Gospel text that the needs aren't going to go away. Large scale needs like hate, violence, poverty. Small scale needs like, “Just one more quick question,” and, “Do you have a minute?” The nagging of compassion that pulls at us to notice, listen, ask, and respond. These ways are with us in this life even when we are seeking rest.

Our call is to find the rhythm. Serve, live, notice, rest. Care, name, touch, rest. Speak out, stand up, march on, rest. Invite, implore, invoke, rest. Welcome, feed, heal, rest. And like the disciples, we do not head off to the deserted place alone, we are led there by Jesus. We do not face the waiting crowd alone, with all its questions and all its needs, we face it with Jesus leading the way. His peace is for them and for us. His rest is for them and for us. His bread and his cup, his easy yoke, his truth and light, his Way...is enough for all of us who wait for him in the deserted place.

What did he say to them as he got out of the boat? What did he teach? What needs did they name before him? Were they like yours? Were they like mine? Whatever they all brought to the quiet place, Jesus was able to receive them all as they held that space together.

Picture yourself there. Are you in the boat crossing over with Jesus? Exhausted from your work, your constant giving of yourself, your shock at how rocky the world can be? Are you chasing after Jesus from the shoreline? Certain he holds the answers to your questions? Are you sitting in the deserted place eager for rest, listening to his gentle teaching, grateful for the people who have gathered there with you, filled with spirit and then with bread?

Before we return to the needs of this day, linger in this quiet place just a little longer. Let this poem by Jan Richardson be our blessing:

Curl this blessing
beneath your head
for a pillow.
Wrap it about yourself
for a blanket.
Lay it across your eyes
and for this moment
cease thinking about
what comes next,
what you will do
when you rise.

Let this blessing
gather itself to you
like the stillness
that descends
between your heartbeats,
the silence that comes
so briefly
but with a constancy
on which
your life depends.

Settle yourself
into the quiet
this blessing brings,
the hand it lays
upon your brow,
the whispered word
it breathes into
your ear
telling you
all shall be well
all shall be well
and you can rest
now.