

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 21, 2024 – The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Two weeks ago our lesson from Mark's Gospel described Jesus sending out his twelve disciples in pairs to travel as his ambassadors to villages surrounding his hometown of Nazareth. The disciples were instructed to preach repentance and to heal the sick and cast out demons. Some time has passed, and the disciples are now re-gathered around Jesus. We can imagine how eager they are to tell him their adventures and ask him questions. As we know from recent lessons, Jesus' reputation, especially as a healer, was steadily growing. Crowds of people followed him everywhere. Mark writes, "many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat."

So Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They all went by boat to a deserted place. Mark doesn't say how they spent their time away. We know that when Jesus withdrew from others, he prayed to his Father. We may assume that they ate together in peace and rested. Perhaps they talked among themselves or sought Jesus' advice. The time for retreat came to an end, and they returned by boat, to a "great crowd."

Mark tells us that when Jesus saw the people, "he had compassion for them because they were like a sheep without a shepherd." This image – sheep without a shepherd – occurs frequently in the Bible to describe people who lack a prophet or king to lead them. Jesus knew that God had called him to shepherd God's people. So, in compassion, Jesus returned to the people, to teach them and heal them.

This short, easy to comprehend passage has profound implications for people who want to follow Jesus because we see Jesus and his disciples doing two things: engaging and serving the world and retreating from the world for rest and renewal. This model for Christian life has shaped monastic tradition, notably the Benedictine tradition. We find its rhythm in the lives of holy men and women we honor in the church. The most reclusive Christians – think of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who lived alone in caves in Egypt in the 4th century or of 14th century Julian of Norwich living alone in a cell attached to a church – even these "hermits" left their solitude to offer spiritual direction or to teach newcomers the way of holy life or to counsel and confront political and religious leaders. And the most actively engaged Christians – think of Mother Teresa in India or Dorothy Day living among the poor in the slums of New York City – even these "activists" retreated from their work to solitude, regular prayer, and the sacraments of the church.

We may say that Jesus' model is grounded in the Hebrew Bible, specifically in the Ten Commandments. Listen to the commandment about the Sabbath from the Book of Deuteronomy (5:12-15): "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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 ... Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." We were made by God our creator with the capacity to work as well as the need for rest and renewal and we honor God who made us as we are by honoring both. That is one part of the wisdom of the commandment to take Sabbath rest. The other important point is that the God whom we worship freed God's people from slavery – from work without end and without rest and renewal – therefore to keep the Sabbath holy is a way to honor God, our liberator.

God and freedom. When you think of God, does the concept of freedom come to your mind? We believe that God wants us to be free to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves, all for the good of the world and for our joy. I would encourage us all to think of God as our liberator from whatever enslaves us, from whatever binds our freedom to love and live abundantly.

God calls us to spiritual freedom, and I believe God will help us to become free. But we need to cooperate with that project. To begin with we might ask ourselves what enslaves us now. If you have been or are truly addicted to a substance or behavior, you know exactly what enslavement means, and you know that you may need others' help to find freedom. For many of us, our enslavement is less intense, though real enough. We may be enslaved by bad habits that rob us of our time or our peace of mind or our financial resources. How might we identify these traps and break out of them?

We recognize that the food we put into our bodies affects our physical health. What about our spiritual health? What are we taking in to our souls? What do we read? What do we listen to? What do we watch on television? Does what we take in raise us to greater love or bring us down to anger and contempt and despair? What company do we keep? How do we allow others to affect what we do and what we think and what we say? Are our companions walking in the Way of Love, or at least attempting to, or are they on another path? How are we spending our time? Without even thinking about it, are we wasting our time and attention, pulled by the many forces outside ourselves that lure us away from our true selves? And what about our inner lives, our thoughts and feelings? What do we encourage within ourselves – for example, love and gratitude or criticism and complaint? How are we directing our own souls?

This process of identifying and breaking out of the traps that enslave us is connected to taking Sabbath rest and to God's desire for us to live and thrive. In Psalm 23 we assert that God "revives my soul." Haven't we all felt the deep need for God to revive our souls? Scripture tells us that God is willing and able to revive our souls. But to be revived by God we need to turn to God and attend to God. As Jesus told his disciples in this morning's lesson, "Come away" – with Jesus – "to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Jesus knows how much we need to rest and be revived, and he invites us to spend time apart with him so that he can give us rest and more abundant life.

Each of us needs to work out exactly how to spend time apart with God, how to honor Sabbath time in our lives. For many of you, who are very busy with work and family and community activities, this will be a challenge. May I suggest a couple of strategies? One is to take the opportunity to direct your mind to God while you are doing routine activities such as doing the dishes or walking your dog or exercising or taking a shower. Turn your mind to God. Thank God for God's gifts in your life and the lives of those you love. Pray for those in need. Pray for your own needs. Worship the Lord. Another strategy is to take one minute every hour when you are working as a "Sabbath minute," a moment when you allow yourself to be revived by something beautiful – the sight of a flower, the tune of a hymn you love, the memory of someone's love or kindness, some words of scripture. If you can do more than this, set aside time each day for prayer, reading, perhaps writing. If you have identified habits that rob you of time – our phones and social media come to mind – then see if you can "take back" some of that time and use it to turn to God, the giver of all good gifts, including time.

In Deuteronomy we are reminded that the God we honor by keeping Sabbath time is the God who rescued his people from slavery. May we turn away from whatever enslaves us in our lives, and may we turn freely to our Lord, who invites us to come away and rest with him. Amen.