

“A Deserted Place” / Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 / 22 July 2012

The crowds press in, yammering and calling. There are multitudes of people, crying out for healing and for hope. So Jesus says to his busy, harried disciples, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves, and rest awhile.” That sounds nice, doesn’t it? Come away! Let’s get some rest. I find that many people wouldn’t “come away and rest” if their lives depended on it—which, of course, they do. There are certain tasks we can never seem to put aside. But “come away to a deserted place and rest.”

I was sitting in traffic at the end of Bower Hill Road, at that slow, slow intersection where it meets Washington Road at the top of a hill. If you’re further back than the fifth car in line, it’s a mathematical impossibility that you’ll make it through that traffic light. It’s a light that I usually end up sitting through at least twice, and this day was no different. As I sat there, feeling a little hurried, I decided to settle in and read the bumper stickers on the car in front of me. You might not know this, but a preacher’s work is never done. I’m forever reading bumper stickers in search of sermon material. Almost anything can be sermon fodder. TV shows, conversations overheard in public, newspaper articles, trips to the dentist: any old stuff of life could potentially make its way into a sermon someday because, when it’s done right, preaching is exactly about the stuff of life. For that reason, I take notes on my iPhone. And there I sat at that long traffic light, taking notes on the bumper sticker of the car in front of me. It was an antique Dodge Dart from the 1970s. The little man behind the wheel looked like a runaway garden gnome who’d lost his hat. The biggest bumper sticker read, “Fear God and keep His commandments. Turn from sin and receive mercy and forgiveness through Jesus’ blood.” Not exactly a catchy slogan to paste on your bumper. Another read, “Trust, serve, obey, and follow Jesus Christ.” Well, I thought, that one’s a little more to my liking. And I had to ask myself, if I were to attach a pithy little thought to my car, a nice little bit of advice for the world, what would it be? I’ve never put a bumper sticker on my car before, maybe because I could never commit myself to a single sentence. I’d need paragraphs in 12-font script.

Recently on a short sojourn at Chautauqua, I read yet more bumper stickers in hopes of finding yet more sermon material. For those of you who don’t know Chautauqua, it is what would happen if National Public Radio decided to host a church camp: costly, intellectual, mostly secular. But up at Chautauqua, the vehicular wisdom tends to be about world peace, and whales, and Tibet—all of which are good things. Most of the bumper stickers up there are serious, self-important messages that condemn corporate greed, or extol the virtues of veganism, or advocate for various political candidates. But I found a single bumper sticker that made me smile. It asked, “Why are there interstate highways in Hawaii?” A touch of playfulness, even at the Chautauqua Institution! And now, after reading all those bumper stickers and diligently recording their messages into my iPhone for future use in a sermon, I find that all of them are thoroughly...unpreachable. I can’t really preach on any of them. You can never fit the whole truth onto a bumper—even if you drive a big old Hummer. But the lesson that I came away with, as I looked through the all the bumper sticker notes on my iPhone was this: Even when my mind should be at rest, even when I’m sitting at red lights, even when I’m on vacation, I just can’t seem to put the work aside. It’s an unpromising task, writing down the wisdom that people have glued to their bumpers, but one that my preacherly self cannot resist.

What work do you end up taking home with you? Now I know that some of us are retired, and others don't receive a paycheck for our labors. But what burdens do you bear with you even on vacation? What identities do you find impossible to put aside? Gifford Pinchot was a forester and the father of modern conservationism; he served twice as governor of Pennsylvania. Pinchot once said: "I have been governor every now and then, but I am a forester all the time." I could say something similar, and I imagine you could, too. I've been a teacher and a school administrator now and then; but I'm a pastor all the time. We're all called upon to wear so many hats. But there are certain selves that are so deeply ingrained in us that we simply can't turn them off. Who are you all the time? What element of your identity can you not turn off, even on vacation? When you go up to the mountains or down to the beach, do you—like my wife—take along a workbag full of documents and projects that really, technically don't belong there? "Come away," Jesus says, "to a deserted place by yourselves and rest a while."

More easily said than done, for us and for Jesus! When he takes his disciples across the lake to escape the crowds, the people are so desperate for hope that they walk the whole way around the lake and find him there. Even in that place of retreat, Jesus has compassion on them and ends up tending to their needs and neglecting his own, at least for while. And yet, throughout the gospels, we see Jesus slipping away quietly to be by himself: in the wilderness, early in the morning, at the top of a mountain, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sometimes his little mini-escapes work, and sometimes they don't. The important thing is that he knew very well the necessity of seeking out a deserted place for rest and peace. It's called "Sabbath." It's as ancient as our moral code itself, some say as old as creation. It's called "Sabbath," and if we can no longer fit it all into a single day of the week, then we need to take it here and there, now and then, as we're able. There are whole dimensions to ourselves and our world that we never, never see because we do not allow ourselves enough Sabbath to discover them. There is courage, and well-being, and hope that will never be ours because we never allowed ourselves enough Sabbath to claim them. In a world where our lives are increasingly driving us past the limits of our sanity, in a world where our lives are fragmented by all the many selves that we're required to be, all the duties we have to perform, in a world where random violence and crazy weather further fragment our sense of safety, it's especially necessary that we rediscover the soul-restoring, life-giving power of Sabbath.

The word "Sabbath" can have an ominous ring to it. It conjures visions of the old days when boys were made to wear clip-on neckties all Sunday long. There was a church service in the morning and another in the evening, and in between the two, kids were not allowed to go to the movies or toss a baseball. "Sabbath," to the popular imagination, still means blue laws, and rules, and long, empty days with all the shops locked up tight and nothing to do. The old Morrissey song said, "Every day is like Sunday. Everyday is silent and gray." For me, as a child, Sunday always meant doing the homework that I'd been putting off all weekend. Presbyterians used to be known as strict sabbatarians. When I was a Presbyterian lay-missionary in Africa, in fact, a fundamentalist "Bible Presbyterian" missionary came to our region. His unsuccessful goal was to steal people from my Presbyterian church and induct them into his. Even so, we had a cordial relationship. One Sunday afternoon he stopped by my house in a huge conversion van (appropriately enough); he saw me preparing a lesson for my Monday English class, and he scolded me, "You shouldn't be doing that; today's the Sabbath."

But when I say “Sabbath,” I don’t mean more rules to keep or more joys to abstain from. What I really mean by “Sabbath” is a daily quest for balance. All the fragmentation in our lives calls out for wholeness—the deep restorative health that comes from leading balanced lives. By “Sabbath,” I mean a way of life that includes just a little bit of playfulness into the fabric of every day, and a little bit of prayer, and a little bit of work, and a little bit of rest. To each day its measure of these four things—the very stuff of life: laughter and meditation, labor and relaxation. I believe that in these harried, hurried times, we can still lead lives of wholeness if we practice daily Sabbath. Sabbath comes not necessarily from setting aside an entire day each week for respite and meditation, though that would be perfect if you could do it. Wholeness comes from including into each day its share of work and rest, spiritual practices and simple play.

An old man’s wife had died. Her graveside service was just barely finished when there was a massive clap of thunder, followed by a tremendous bolt of lightning, and even more thunder rumbling off into the distance. The little old man looked at the pastor and calmly said, “Well, she’s there.” Sometimes it seems to me that there are people who won’t even rest in peace when they’re dead. It’s just that our daily lives are accompanied by so much thunder and lightning, noise and drama. We have to hurry. There are people depending on us, people watching us, people expecting things of us. There are bills to pay, and grandchildren to see, and committee meetings to attend. And in truth, most of us wouldn’t have it any other way. Our very identities call us to be busy about the tasks that give our life meaning. There are certain jobs that are so dear to our sense-of-self that we can’t even imagine laying them down. And everyday, we deal with crises as they arise, meet deadlines, write reports, get backaches, get headaches, get all kinds of disorders; then we expect two weeks of vacation and a prescription to fix us. Jesus’ version of Sabbath seems to integrate a degree of play, and rest, and prayer into all the days of toil. Sometimes it’s too much to ask that we step away from all our labors for a full day; maybe the real key to faithful living is to temper our good and meaningful work each day with the other three ingredients of life: relaxation, and play, and worship.

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves, and rest awhile.” Oh, beautiful invitation, whispered down the centuries of time, over years and miles from the shores of Galilee! “Come away.” That ancient Sabbath call goes all the way back to Genesis 2, and it’s not merely a bit of good advice for a happier life. It’s a rule for faithful living. “Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy.” Isn’t a long, healing Sabbath exactly what this old world needs today? Wouldn’t Sabbath go a long way toward mending the fences between hostile neighbors? Back in seminary we called this “the eschatological hope.” How’s that for a \$30,000 word that I’ll be paying off in student loans until the day I retire? The “eschatological hope” is the deathless dream that a day is coming when no Haitian child will die of cholera, when money will not buy respect, when all the injustices of history will be set right. It’s that old human yearning for a day that will not be ruled by calendars, and clocks, and banks—a day when the world will be healed. If we cloaked that faraway dream in an academic-sounding word, “eschatological,” it was surely just an attempt to make ourselves believe in something that’s not entirely believable.

But hope doesn’t have to be reasonable. “Come away to a deserted place; rest awhile.” To each day its share of work and rest, prayer and play. This is a life of balance, the daily practice of Sabbath. It’s why I don’t always mind just a little bit of work when I’m on vacation. How will you practice Sabbath in your life? Amen.