

Sunday July 22nd, 2018
8th after Pentecost

PRAYER: O God of deliverance, our knees bow before you; with our voices we sing your praises. Our hands are uplifted to give you honour; our eyes are opened to behold your blessing. You are merciful in providing us a haven; you are caring and know all our needs; your presence is our assurance that you accept our worship. To you is the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The offering is an expression of stewardship and worship. Through the act of offering, we express heartfelt gratitude for God's goodness and blessing, while acknowledging our willingness and joy in sharing responsibility toward the dynamic work of the Reign of God. The act of offering is both an illustration of the wisdom of generosity and the discipline of the spiritual life.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, your glory fills the heavens and the earth; the diversity and beauty of your creation is greater than we have words to describe. We are your creatures; and you, our Creator. As the Psalmist said, "Who are we that you should be mindful of us?" We recognize that the distance between us was great and it could not be bridged from our side to yours; so, you bridged it from your side to ours. Despite our willful disregard for you, our contempt for your law, and our violation of your covenant, in Jesus Christ you took upon yourself our human frame. In him you willingly assumed all the limits and braved all the risks of every person born on earth. In him you became a member of the human family that we might become members of your family. In him you turned our adoring eyes from the majesty of creation to the love of the Creator. For this, the mightiest of all your mighty acts, we worship you.

We thank you, dear Lord, that in Jesus you rejected our low opinion of human nature: for laying bare for us to see our preference for crowns over crosses; and for exposing our habit of sacrificing the joy of eternity for the pleasure of the moment. When we behold ourselves in him, we cannot but exclaim that you have made us little less than God and crowned us with glory and honour.

But when we look away from Jesus to examine ourselves, we behold a very different creature. We desire to shamelessly pursue ambition, ignoring the needs of people to build monuments to our fame. We discover that the enemy we most have to fear is the enemy within: that in our hearts there lurks a breaker of all those commandments designed to protect our neighbours from ourselves.

The sight of this evil disgusts us, but we do not have to surrender to its power and its darkness. Help us dear Lord, so to fix our hearts on Christ, that the good we would, we do; and the evil we would not, we do not.

O God, our neighbourhoods are full of people like the crowds that flocked to Jesus-sheep without a shepherd. Yet we know to which flock they belong, for we know who their shepherd is. Lead us to them, that we might lead them to you: that we are they might become one flock; that you might be the Good Shepherd of us all; and that, with singleness of mind and purity of heart, we might heed your voice.

BENEDICTION: O Lord, we have gathered together to receive your counsel and discern your will. As we part, let us not go as we came. Let us leave with memories rekindled and hope awakened. Help us so to heed your words that we will walk in your ways. Amen.

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Mark 6:30-44
“Shepherdless Sheep”

There was a businessman, who was feeling harassed and discouraged from overwork. It was so bad he was having trouble sleeping, he was gaining weight from too little exercise and his family life was suffering. In an attempt to deal with his stress, he went to a psychiatrist and the psychiatrist immediately prescribed less work. “Furthermore”, prescribed the doctor, “I want you to spend an hour each week walking around the cemetery.”

“Why on earth would you want me to do that? What would I do in a cemetery?” the man replied. “Not much. Take it easy and look around. Get acquainted with some of the men already there and remember that they didn’t finish their work either. Nobody does, you know.” (1001 More Humorous Illustrations, p. 345) Did you catch what Jesus told his disciples in our gospel lesson today? “Let’s get away from the crowds for a while and rest.”

Mark adds that Jesus and his disciples were so overwhelmed by people that they didn’t have time to eat, so they left by boat to a deserted place. Now if Jesus found it necessary to model and lead his disciples to take time to rest and recover, and they lived in a pre-industrial age, two thousand years ago; how much more urgent is this call to rest today. More and more we encounter people, and experience ourselves, the desperate need for rest, and the feelings of guilt when we finally try to look after ourselves.

Michael Curry, Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina gave a rousing sermon recently in which he declared that what we need is crazy Christians. Christians who buck the trends of our society, and who look crazy to the world. Now a huge part of that craziness is doing stuff. Doing justice, doing acts of love. Doing forgiveness etc. We need to acknowledge that part of our being different from the world is related to what we do. I get it.

But what if part of bucking the trends of the world is bucking the trend of busy-ness. I think we are becoming a world of ding-a-lings. Really, I do. Today we seem to be like Pavlov’s dog, reacting to every ring we hear. We have become leashed to these things called cell phones. We hear a ring, or a ring tune and we jump like our pants are on fire. I have watched as people react as if the world depended on them getting that call or text.

We are so leashed to these things that people have to be reminded to turn them off at a funeral, or at the theater, and yes yours should be off right now. We are becoming defined by our dings. We make our busyness a kind of badge of honour. People ask each other how it’s going, yours truly included, and we react instinctively with “very busy”, “crazy”, or “overwhelming”. We say things like this in a way it sounds like we are bragging.

“Look at me! See how busy I am. How indispensable I am.” Busyness is not a badge of honour; it’s the sign of an imbalanced life, an imbalanced ministry, an arid spiritual life. “Come away”, Jesus calls. This is important for us to focus on. Whether we admit it or not, there is a very ugly image of God in Christ going around, in which our Lord is perceived as an angry taskmaster. If we are not fully productive in every waking hour, we think we are letting God down. Come on! Really? Even God took a day off.

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Jesus said his yoke is lite, so why do we live like following Christ is sucking the life out of us? The so called “Protestant work ethic”, is a lie. A vicious life destroying lie. “Come away” Jesus says. Notice he didn’t say “Go away” or “get away”. His call isn’t about escape, although I admit that does appeal to me on occasion. His call is to “Come away”, with him. “Let us” Jesus said. Jesus didn’t send his disciples off on their own. He went with them. He led them to the place, where they could rest.

Do you know such a place? It doesn’t even have to be a geographical location. Sometimes it is just a time of silence and prayer. Norman Vincent Peale tells the story of a time he went to a Quaker meeting. He had a perplexing problem to solve, and he had not been able to find an answer. Peal writes, “In a Quaker meeting, you practice the art of spiritual silence. It is a practical demonstration of Psalm 45, ‘Be still and know that I am God’, or Isaiah 30, ‘In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.’

After a while, even to the unpracticed, the deep silence has a way with you. At this meeting, a man spoke. He said, ‘If anyone here has a problem, let that person drop it into a pool of deep quietness’. I had never heard a more apt description”. Peale writes. He continues, “Because that silence was deep and it was like a pool. I took that problem that had been baffling me and I said to myself, ‘All right. We’ll see what happens’ and I let it drop into that pool of quietness. Then the man said, ‘Now just sit resting in God’s quietness.

Believe that God will break up your problem into its component parts and give you the answer before the meeting is over.” Peal continued, “We continued to sit and wait and listen in silence. I don’t know how long a time elapsed before another man arose and said, ‘Amen’. And that was the end of the meeting. All of a sudden, as clear as crystal, came the answer to my problem. And never in my life have I had as right an answer. The particular slant was different, for I had been thinking and searching in a different direction. But intuitively, I recognize this for what it was, God’s answer.

St. Gregory the Theologian wrote in his *First Theological Oration*, ‘It is necessary to be truly at leisure to know God and when we get a convenient season, to discern the straight road of things divine.’ There is a time to speak and a time to be quiet, a time to be active and doing things and a time to stop and rest. I don’t think anyone comes to the end of their lives and says, “Gee, I wish I had been busier.”

I came across a little nugget of advice from a Methodist minister who urged, “A little more loafing please.” Or how about this folk saying, “Many of the world’s problems come because our affairs are being handled by tired people.” And that is more truthful than we might care to admit. Being tired is just as impairing as being drunk. Without proper rest people make mistakes that can be lethal.

Mistakes at the wheel of the car. Tired doctors prescribe the wrong meds or mess up a surgery. How many times have we heard of a terrible accident and then heard that “Pilot, driver or engineer fatigue was a contributing factor. “Come away”, Jesus urged. And this leads to another important point. Who is determining your agenda in life? The Gospel lesson tells us that the crowds were so demanding that the disciples and Jesus had no time to eat or rest.

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The crowds were relentless and we cannot blame them. They were sheep without a shepherd. The sick desired healing, the demon possessed wanted release. The hungry wanted to be fed. The lost wanted to be saved. The ignorant wanted to be taught. And just as the disciples dealt with one person, another quickly took their place. Just look around this world, even your own neighbourhood and you know the needs are endless.

Everyone clamouring for help, clamouring for our attention. If Jesus had let the crowd dictate his pace and his schedule, it probably would have killed his disciples, and maybe even him. We too need to ask ourselves who is dictating our pace, our schedule. Sometimes we tell ourselves that we have no choice in the matter. We are at the beck and call of our boss, our children, our parishioners, our customers, or whoever claims our time.

Is this true. Are you content and living an abundant life by rushing around every time your smart-phone rings? I read a report recently that raised a dire warning about the number of people who are so tied to their jobs, that they answer calls on their cell phones 24/7. It's so bad they take their laptops on vacation, and answer work emails when they should be resting or relaxing or spending quality time with their loved ones.

Who or what is running your life? Is your life defined more by what you do, than by whose you are? Can you even hear over the din of busy-ness Christ's call to "Come away"? Have you the spiritual fortitude to say no to demands on your person that are unreasonable? Do you ever find yourself feeling guilty when someone demands your attention, and you just are too exhausted to care at the moment, so you listen and just go through the motions? "Come away!"

One of my favourite sentences in our scripture lesson today is verse 32. "They left by boat for a quieter place." It may not surprise you to learn that my enjoyment of fishing, and being on our boat, is not just about the fish. Although it is great fun to catch them, and they are tasty. On my boat in a northern lake, is my "coming away" time. It does not take much time for me to settle in, line in the water, birds singing (the loons I especially like), squirrels chattering, catching rare sights of otters, ducks, and even a bear, and I find myself slipping away.

Slipping away from the busyness. Soon I find myself praying and thinking and listening. I jokingly say that fishing is a great booster of a prayer life. I mean I am constantly praying, "God give me a fish, or God please let it not get off the hook." All of us need that "away" spot, and it will look different to different people. Some people listen to music. Some read a good book. Some enjoy a walk in a quiet park.

My only advice is for you is to turn off your phone when you are "away" with Jesus. Don't worry, the world does not revolve around you. The planets will not go out of alignment if you take a rest, even a long rest. As the Gospel lesson demonstrated in verses 53-56, the problems and needs will still be there when your get back. But after a good rest, you will be in a much better position to be effective.

Perhaps you have heard of Thomas Aquinas, the famous medieval theologian. He created one of the greatest works of theology in Western civilization. It is called *Summa Theologica*. It is a massive work: 38 treatises, 3000 articles and 10,000 objections.

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His goal was what we call systematic theology. He wanted to tie together all the thoughts about God into one coherent whole of truth. It was a huge undertaking. Aquinas included thoughts on anthropology, science, ethics, psychology, political theory, and theology, all trying to point to an overall understanding of the nature of God. However, on December 6th, 1273 something changed dramatically for Aquinas. He suddenly, without warning, stopped his project.

What precipitated this halt? Well, Aquinas was celebrating Mass in the Chapel of St. Thomas, and while in worship, God revealed a glimpse of eternity, and Aquinas suddenly realized that all his efforts to describe God, fell so far short that he would never write again. When his secretary, Reginald, tried to encourage him to do more writing, Aquinas said, “Reginald, I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems so much straw.” (Fresh Illustrations, p. 91)

Times of “away” are not about study, or learning about God, although that is a pursuit worthy of attention. Jesus’ call to “come away” is all about experiencing God like Thomas Aquinas did. Another picture of this is what Isaiah experience in Isaiah chapter 6. There we find Isaiah’s description of how God swept him up into heaven; into the very throne room of God. Isaiah describes, as best he can, what he saw.

Now the theologians, and biblical scholars in our midst, enjoy exploring the deep mysteries of what Isaiah saw. What, they wonder is a seraphim? It may be a useful experience in some ways, but that is not the point of Isaiah’s experience. Isaiah was “called away” not to learn about God, but rather and more importantly, to experience God. To dwell in his presence. Now it is very exciting that in many ways we have something better than what Isaiah experienced.

Sure, it would be awesome to be in that throne room, and one day we all shall, but notice Isaiah had to be brought to God. Now with Jesus, God comes to us. He calls us away not to impress us, but to restore us. He calls us to come and just enjoy being with him. No agenda, no projects, no deadline, just rest and refreshment. One story from the bible that has always spoken to me is in 1 Kings 19 where Elijah, fearing for his life flees into the wilderness.

Out in the wilderness, the bible says that Elijah sat down under a broom tree and waited to die. He even begged God to take his life. In other words, Elijah was worn out, defeated, dejected, and burned out. He just couldn’t go on any longer. The bible tells us that while under the broom tree God came and brought him bread, and water to drink. God tells Elijah he has a long journey ahead, so he needed to be rested and fed.

Did you know that before we went to Toronto, Laura and I ran a bed and breakfast and retreat center called “The Broomtree Guest House”? Our idea was to provide a place to “come away”, to meet quietly with God, and many folks did over the time we were there. Where’s the broom tree in your life? Where is that place where you can shut off the world, and simply be with God? I do encourage you to not leave your time away until you are in as bad a state as Elijah.

But if you are calling on God to take your life, then by all means why are you not away already? We are no good to anyone, even ourselves when our strength is gone, our vision clouded and our hope diminished.

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When complimented on her homemade biscuits, the cook at a popular Christian conference center told Dr. Harry Ironside, “Just consider what goes into the making of these biscuits. The flour itself doesn’t taste good, neither does the baking powder, nor the shortening, nor the other ingredients. However, when I mix them all together, and put them in the oven, they come out just right.”

You know much of life can seem tasteless, even bad, but God is able to take those ingredients of our lives in such a way as incredible, magnificent things can happen. But to do this marvelous thing in your life he needs you to “come away”. To experience the depth and wonder of his love for you. So, “come away” my friends and taste and see that the Lord is good.