

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 6:30-34-53-56

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalms 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

July 22, 2018

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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Did you know that when a sheep coughs, it sounds just like a human coughing? It's true. I know...that's a rather random fact to start my sermon with this morning but it reminds me that sometimes, random facts are the most interesting. Those facts that we come across when we least expect it...that make us wonder – how in the world did I not know that? Random facts are often not discovered when we are rushing around trying to get things accomplished. When we are too busy with our heads down and our to-do lists out. We rarely have time to be curious about the world around us, much less stop to listen to sheep cough.

When I heard this particular sheep, we were on our walking pilgrimage two weeks ago in Scotland and we stopped to spend some time with a small herd of sheep. That's when I heard the coughing. At first, I thought it was a farmhand, possibly propped up against the other side of the stone wall taking an afternoon rest. In fact, I became so convinced a human was on the other side of that wall that I started to peek over to make sure. As I was gazing over, as I took the time to actually look, I saw him – the sheep, his entire body shaking a bit with each cough. And I have to say...at his expense, it was honestly the best thing I had seen in months and I couldn't stop laughing.

I love these kinds of random moments that only come when you slow down long enough to look over an old stone wall. Moments that we often miss because we are worn out and stressed out, pulled in too many directions with too many deadlines. And, so we stay on that proverbially treadmill, never taking a rest, never stopping to look around. Our lives have become so busy with a barrage of emails and texts in a 24/7 expectation of accessibility that we may find that we throw up our hands and become resolved that this is just the way life is.

But, when we throw up our hands, what's the result? I know you have all lived it. Lived with feeling as though you can hardly make it through a day – exhausted when you get home, no energy for the things that you love, and too tired to spend time with people you care about; much less be curious and enjoy the world we live in. Your health suffers. Your relationships suffer. Your happiness suffers.

I often wonder what kind of world we have found ourselves in when we can't do the things that matter most. And there is one particular trend that I see over and over – that is in the place of exhaustion our faith often becomes the first victim of our busyness. Our time living with God, suffers. Time spent in prayer or bible study, time at church on Sunday, time in worship or in fellowship with others.

The values we have come to cherish over the years fall away and we stop taking the time to notice the multitude of need around us. Our time living our faith, suffers. Time spent sitting

with an older adult who is alone, making a meal for someone who is sick, picking up a busy mom's child from school.

We miss the needs in our own hearts and in our own communities. The need for connection, for caring, for conversation. We miss the things that sustain us because we have gotten so overwhelmed with what strips us of our ability to thrive. Our busyness all too often has created a thick dividing line between our faith, the things we know we need to do and the things we *think* we have to do. Sound familiar?

I have to say...I find a lot of comfort in the fact that Jesus gets it. Jesus gets our need for rest and renewal. He also gets that without rest and renewal, we will have zero ability to effectively nurture our inward spiritual lives as well as our outward lives of service. When we are running on empty, we simply get too distracted to notice those beautiful random moments of grace and gratitude, of connection and compassion.

The apostles in our text from Mark are in many ways, just like you and me. They've been working so hard and people just want more and more of them, so much so that the apostles didn't even have time to eat. People were actually chasing them down. Jesus says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." In other words, the work can wait – even though it is extremely important life-giving work, it can wait.

Yet, however hard Jesus and the apostles try...the work just follows them wherever they go. People keep coming to them to be healed and cared for. In the villages and cities and farms. But notice what happens...It's as though Jesus literally shields the apostles from their work – at least for a time. Notice - the text doesn't say that they *all* went to the people to heal them and care for them. It says *Jesus* went to the people...and wherever he went he healed anyone who touched him. Jesus had compassion on each and every one of them – he continued to work even as he tells the apostles to rest.

There are two beautiful things going on here. The first is Jesus' constant ability to see and respond to the need in his midst. The random, unspoken prayers. The humble whispered cry for help. The loud plea for relief. He hears and knows them all and he answers each need one by one. It is Jesus after all.

The second is that he knows that he has sent the apostles out to do the same. To answer the needs in their midst. But to do so, they have to be able to see...really see the needs of others. And Jesus knows they can't be just like him. They can't do all of this work unless they first take care of themselves. Come away, all by yourselves, and rest a while.

But folks, I have to be honest...sometimes trying to rest just feels like one more thing I have to do on my ever growing to-do list. One more thing to fit in. One more thing that demands my attention. I remember when I was single parenting and working crazy hours and trying to get through my ordination process – so many demands and I was exhausted. And the bishop asked me, "What are you doing to take care of yourself?" I thought I might scream right then and

there. Bishop or no bishop. Because, when all the weight is on your shoulders – rest seems like a luxury, even if Jesus tells you to do so. It just seems so much easier and more manageable to put our own needs aside and convince ourselves that one day we will get around to resting, one day we will get around to helping our friends and neighbors. But, maybe just not today. And then this verse from Mark keeps calling us back, Come away, all by yourselves, and rest a while.

I ran across this lovely exploration of rest in a little book entitled *A Time to Keep Silence* and the author writes about his journey of rest when he commits to live at a monastery for a while. He arrived depleted and desperate for something, although I don't think he could put his finger on exactly what he needed. He just couldn't keep going the way he had been.

He says that when he first arrived at the monastery, he slept so poorly at night and he kept falling asleep during the day. He felt restless, had spells of insomnia and nightmares. Then, things shifted. He came to where he was sleeping more hours in the day than he was awake. His sleep became deep and profound. And then, finally, after allowing himself the opportunity to really rest an extraordinary transformation occurred. He states that those long periods of sleep shrank to five hours of light, dreamless and perfect sleep at night, followed by awakenings full of energy and freshness. He explains that once he focused on allowing his body, mind, and soul time to shift out of the demands of the world, that the tremendous accumulation of tiredness broke loose. He was eventually left with nineteen hours a day of freedom. Where his heart was joyful, his body full of energy, his mind alert. Where work became easier with every passing moment. He noticed more, connected with the world again, found joy in his commitments and in God's creation.

He found real presence with God. He rested and was ready to notice again.

Br. Nicholas Bartoli, with the Society of St. John the Evangelist, wrote these words about such transformation...

*"Offering God our real presence leaves us open to the grace of awareness, of seeing ourselves and the world as God sees them. And what we see is infinitely beautiful and precious beyond words, a place where earth and heaven meet, where peace and joy meet, where the light of Christ and Spirit of Love meet."*

Folks, I am not saying it's easy – this ability to rest. But it is essential. God wants you to be in God's presence, to be renewed and replenished, to take care of yourself so that you can serve others with a joyful heart.

So to start... Maybe you spend time in prayer each day, offering your deepest concerns to God. Maybe you come to the church during the week when no one else is here and sit in the sanctuary in complete silence. Maybe you take a day off work to simply enjoy being outside. Maybe you start by simply noticing something random...taking time to look over an old stone wall and give thanks for the God's creation. Whatever you do, remember that God is calling you to, "Come away, all by yourselves and rest a while." Your soul needs it. Thanks be to God. Amen.