Sunday, July 23, 2000
COME AWAY AND REST
Mark 6:30-34

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." That's what Jesus asked his disciples to do one day. Here's the background of that invitation. According to Mark's gospel, Jesus had earlier sent the disciples out two by two to teach and heal.

They did so eagerly and with some success. Mark tells us, "They went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." In other words, they worked long hours and were very busy. When they returned to report their activities, they were excited but worn out. So, Jesus said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

There are times in our lives when we all need to hear this invitation. I said to Matt, one of our Associate Ministers, who is beginning a vacation with his wife, Maren, this week, "This text is for you. You've been working hard, now it's time to come away to a deserted place and rest a while." And that's what they are going to do.

Jesus knew the importance of rhythm in life. There's a time for work and a time for rest. This was an integral part of his Jewish tradition. In his remarkable book, The Gifts of the Jews, Thomas Cahill notes that one of the most unique gifts of the Jewish people to humanity is the concept of a day of rest each week. According to Cahill, no ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest — one day in seven. In the Jewish tradition, the God who made the universe and rested bids us to do the same.

Many Old Testament scholars argue that one of the main purposes of the first creation story in Genesis is to lay the foundation for resting one day in seven. "And on the seventh day, God finished the work that God had done and rested on the seventh day from all the work that had been done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because on it God rested."

Later, this part of the creation story became the basis for the Fourth Commandment in the Ten Commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 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... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it."

Another reason for taking a regular time of rest is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Its version of the Fourth Commandment is connected to the Jews being slaves in Egypt before the Exodus. The Jews are not to work on the Sabbath as a way of remembering that they were once slaves and that God freed them from slavery. As slaves, they had no day of rest, no vacation, and no time off from their labors. But now they are free people, able to live as God intended — observing the rhythm of work and rest. This practice reminds them that, just as they were once slaves in Egypt, they can become slaves to their work.

The connection between freedom and creativity lies just beneath the surface of this tradition. Leisure is appropriate for a free people, and this people, so recently freed, quickly established a quiet weekly celebration of their freedom. Furthermore, leisure is the necessary ground for creativity, and a free people are free to imitate the creativity of God.

Now we can better understand the invitation of Jesus to his disciples when they returned tired and worn out from their work: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” This is not an invitation to laziness or to be resting all the time. If you are always resting, it’s not appreciated. There’s no contrast. You wouldn’t know what darkness is without light, or what light is without darkness. Rest is only appreciated if you have been working.

This invitation may have even more meaning for us today than it did in the time of Jesus. Many of us live increasingly regulated and busy lives. We are not slaves in the traditional sense, but we can become slaves in other ways.

We can become slaves to over-scheduling. There’s a debate going on in our culture: Are our children over-programmed and over-scheduled? Do we have them signed up for too many activities, leaving no time for the creativity that comes with leisure? Are parents slaves to their children’s busy schedules, becoming perpetual taxi drivers? We can also become slaves to our technology.

I recently saw an ad that proclaimed in large bold letters: “YOU SAID IT WHEN YOU GOT YOUR MICROWAVE OVEN, YOUR ANSWERING MACHINE, YOUR VCR, YOUR FAX MACHINE, CD PLAYER, CELLULAR PHONE, LAPTOP COMPUTER, AND EVERY DAY, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE SAY IT ABOUT SKYTEL: HOW DID I EVER SURVIVE WITHOUT IT?”

I’m grateful for all the latest technology but have to watch carefully so I don’t become a slave to it. When we were with the choir in Scandinavia a few weeks ago, we noticed that cell phones are even more prevalent there than here. It wasn’t unusual to see two people walking together, but instead of talking to each other, each one was talking to someone else on their cell phone. It’s true here as well. I’ve had a cell phone for several years and greatly appreciate its convenience, but there’s always the temptation of becoming a slave to it. I need to remember these words of Jesus: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves (leave your cell phone, TV, CD player, and other technology behind) and rest a while.”

Because we are so busy, so over-scheduled, and so used to having things done quickly, we have also become slaves to impatience. We hate to wait — even for 10 or 15 seconds in our fast and fluid world. It’s fun to watch human beings on elevators. I know because I’ve done it. I get on an elevator and feel convinced that the door doesn’t close fast enough, so I impatiently punch the “door close” button, and then the “open door” button when I arrive at my floor.

The impatience begins while waiting for the elevator to arrive. Manufacturers, such as Otis Elevator, know from research that an acceptable waiting time is around 15 seconds, because at 40 seconds, people start to get visibly upset. Impatience intensifies while waiting for the door to close. It’s no wonder that on many elevator control panels, the “door close” button is the one with the paint worn off.

According to James Gleick, author of Faster, pushing the “door close” button on some elevators has no effect except in your own mind. The button is there to make you think you have control over when the door will close or open. I even heard an ad the other day for a new automatic garage door opener that will save five seconds each time you use it.

In a culture of impatience and over-scheduling, the invitation to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” is necessary for all of us to hear and accept.

The benefits are numerous and go beyond the spiritual. Bill Parent, a Roman Catholic priest and long-distance runner, reports that an almost universally recognized training principle is that a runner becomes faster by taking a day off from training each week. The Sabbath principle is built into our physical bodies.

In this sermon, I am not arguing against technology or being more productive because of it. Rather, I am grateful for all the advances that technology continues to provide us. Jesus himself was ahead of his time as a multi-tasker, and his days were filled with compassion. In this short story from the Gospel of Mark, we are told that as he and his disciples tried to get away to a deserted place, a crowd followed. Jesus had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things. And one very important thing he taught them was to take time for rest.

There's a story about some African workers who were hired to carry pieces of heavy equipment on their backs to a remote post in the interior of Africa. After several days of walking, one day they refused to pick up the equipment and go any further. They sat by the side of the road, turning a deaf ear to the appeals of the person in charge. Finally, the leader asked them, "Why don't you want to go on?" One of the workers replied, "Sir, we are waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies."

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Here's another benefit of accepting that invitation. When you take time for your soul to catch up with your body, you renew and enlarge your perspective. I remember my first flight in an airplane more than 45 years ago. It gave me a new perspective on the earth. When you look out the window of an airplane, you begin to see how things fit together: how the hills and valleys interlock, how the fields form a mosaic, and how towns and cities have shape and definition. For an even larger perspective, think of those individuals who have traveled into space. All of them have commented on what a life-changing experience it is to view the planet earth from far out in space. Traveling to another country also gives one a new perspective. It helps you understand things you never quite understood before.

We all need to renew and enlarge our perspectives. Jesus told a story about a rich farmer with a limited perspective on life. He was too busy making money to come away to a deserted place and rest. The farmer was prosperous and patted himself on the back for his skill in getting rich. He then decided that the only thing to do was to make even more money and build bigger barns to store all his wealth.

In the story, God calls this man a fool. He is a successful fool for two reasons: first, because he took all the credit for being so rich, and second, because he thought he deserved it all and could keep it for himself. He forgot what it says in the Old Testament: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me all this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, who gives you the power to get wealth."

He also didn't take into account that one day he would die. According to the story, God said to this rich, successful man, "Fool, tonight you are going to die, and then who is going to get all your wealth?" He didn't take the time to get an adequate perspective on life and death. He needed to hear Jesus' invitation: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest a while."

It's all a matter of healthy self-care. It means being gentle with yourself and others. When you take time off to rest, don't kick yourself for what could have, should have, or would have been.

There are times when we are too hard on ourselves for the things we don't do that we should, as well as for the things we do that we shouldn't.

Unfortunately, being hard on yourself is neither enjoyable nor productive. Some people live with so much shame, guilt, regret, anger, sadness, and remorse that they become overwhelmed and paralyzed. They are unable to take important actions or make decisions because they fear they will mess up. They end up being more reactive than proactive, more bitter than blessed.

If this sounds like you — even a little bit — then today's text has an encouraging word: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest a while." It's another way of saying, be gentle with yourself and with others. When you make a mistake, accept it for what it is — your opportunity to grow through the never-ending journey of life.

Returning from the deserted place, you'll find yourself full of serenity, strangely stronger, and ready to roll up your sleeves and do good work. You'll get the job done, and after your time away, you'll probably do it patiently and peacefully — with several seconds to spare. Amen.