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 the invitation. According to Mark's gospel Jesus had some days earlier sent them out two by two to teach and to 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, were very busy and

when they returned to report their activities, they were excited and 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 along with his wife, Maren this week. "This text is for you. You've been working hard, now it is 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. It was an integral part of his Jewish tradition. In his remarkable book, THE GIFTS OF THE JEWS, Thomas Cahill says that one of their most unique gifts to all of us 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. According to the Jewish tradition, the God who made the universe and rested bids us to do the came.

Many Old Testament scholars argue that one of the main purposes of the first creation story in the book of Genesis, is to lay the

foundation for resting one day in seven. "And on the seventh day God finished the work 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 4th Commandment in the Ten. "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 the 7th day. Therefore the Lord blessed the 7th day and consecrated it."

Another reason for taking a time of rest on a regular basis is found in the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. Its version of the 4th commandment is identified with 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 in Egypt and that God freed them from slavery. Remember God and your freedom. As slaves you had no day of rest, no vacation, no time off from your labors. But now you are free people. Now you can

live as God intended you and everyone else to live by observing the rhythm of work and rest. It was a reminder that in the same way as you were once slaves in Egypt, you can also become a slave to your work .

The connections to both freedom and creativity lie just beneath the surface of this tradition. Leisure is appropriate to a free people and this people so recently freed find themselves quickly establishing a quiet weekly celebration of their freedom. Furthermore leisure is the necessary ground of creativity and a free people are free to imitate the creativity of God.

Now we can understand more fully the invitation of Jesus to his disciples when they return tired and worn out from their work. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." This is not an invitation to laziness or to be resting all the time. If you are always resting, it is not appreciated. There is no contrast. You wouldn't know what darkness is without light or what light is without darkness. Rest is only appreciated if one has been working.

This invitation may have even more meaning for many of us in our time than it did in the time of Jesus. Many of us today live

increasingly regulated and busy lives. We are not slaves in the traditional sense, but can become slaves in other ways.

We can become a slave to over-scheduling. There's a debate going on in our culture right now. Are our children over-programmed and over-scheduled? Do we have them signed up for too many activities so there's no time for the creativity that comes with leisure? Are parents slaves to their children's busy schedules, becoming perpetual taxi drivers taking them here and there?

We can become slaves to our technology.

Recently I 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 am thankful for all the latest technology, but have to watch carefully so that 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 there are even more

prevalent than here. It was not unusual to see two people walking together but instead of talking to each other, each one was talking to someone else somewhere on his or her cell phone. It's true here as well. I've had a cell phone now 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 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 I've done it. I get on an elevator. I'm convinced that the door doesn't close quickly enough and so I've impatiently punched the "door close" button and then the "open door" button when I arrive at the floor I've selected.

The impatience begins while waiting for the elevator to arrive. Manufacturers such as Otis Elevator know from their research that

an acceptable waiting time is in the neighborhood of 15 seconds, because at around 40 seconds people start to get visibly upset. According to John Kendall, Director of Advanced Technology at the elevator company, when people are waiting for an elevator as well as when they're in an elevator, they don't really feel they can do much that is productive. 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 a book

called, FASTER, pushing the "door close" button on some elevators has no effect at all except in your own mind. The button is put there to make you think you have some control over when the door will close or open.

I heard an ad the other day for a new automatic garage door opener that will save 5 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 range far 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 for 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 and he 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.

The story is told of 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 of the

equipment they were supposed to be carrying 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 do this so that your soul catches up with your body, you renew your perspective and you enlarge it. I remember my first flight in an

airplane more than 45 years ago. It gave me a new perspective from which to see the earth. When you look out the window of an airplane, you begin to see how things fit together, how the hills and valley interlock, how the fields form a mosaic and the towns and cities have some 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 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 very limited perspective on what life is all about. He was too busy making money to come away to a deserted place and rest. This farmer was prosperous and patted himself on the back for his skill in making himself 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 himself for

being so rich, and second because he was so stingy and 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 have time to get an adequate perspective on life

and death. He needed to have heard the invitation of Jesus, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest awhile."

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 about what could've, should've or would've been. There are times when you are too hard on yourself for the things you don't do that you should do as well as the things you do that you shouldn't do.

Unfortunately, being hard on yourself is

neither a very enjoyable nor a very productive way to live. Some people, in fact, live with so much shame and guilt, so much regret and anger, so much sadness and remorse, that they become overwhelmed and paralyzed. They are unable to take important actions and make big decisions out of fear that they will foul it up. They end up being more reactive than pro-active, more bitter than blessed.

If this sounds like you, even a little bit like you, then this text for today has an encouraging word: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest

awhile." It's another way of saying, be gentle with yourself and with others. When you make a mistake, learn to 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.