

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost B 2024
July 21, 2024
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

A couple of weeks ago, I was in England visiting my cousins, Liz and Ro, whose name is a shortened form of "Rosemary." Liz and Ro are both retired teachers, which counts them among some of my favorite people ever!... Anyway, while I was there, we did a lot of sightseeing and activities, but one of my favorite things was just sitting on the couch talking with each of them one-on-one. One evening when we were chatting, I shared with Ro that when I was in seventh grade my band teacher once said to me, "Michelle, you are a worry wort!" Afterward, Ro and I had a good chuckle about that, and then I asked her, "What about you, Ro? Are you a worrier?" "Oh, yeah!," she replied. Then she quickly added, "But if you worry, it means you care, doesn't it?!..." I nodded and said, "Absolutely!..." A week later, I was visiting my other cousin, Liz, who is one of the most caring and compassionate people I know. I told her what her younger sister had said: that if you worry, it means you care. And Liz nodded her agreement and said, "Absolutely!"

So, here's the thing, friends: I think some of us are naturally worriers because that's how God has "wired" us!... As I've suggested, that isn't necessarily a bad thing because it means we care. BUT you and I also need to be aware that carrying a deeply ingrained sense of worry while actively caring for others can be exhausting and depleting over time. When we push our already-tired bodies, hearts, and minds to keep going and giving without adequate rest, we run the risk of compassion fatigue... As someone who's danced on the edge of compassion fatigue, let me just say that for Christians there's nothing more dangerous... There's nothing more dangerous because when you and I lose our ability to embody God's compassion and mercy in our relationships with others, we've strayed a long way from following Jesus in the Way of God.

You see, Scripture is clear that our gracious and merciful God is all about compassion. From the very beginning, our God creates all things out of love and for love, and then God immediately declares the work of creation to be "very good." And at the end of the six days of creative work, what does God do? In Genesis 2:2-3, we read that God rests from all the work God has done. Then God blesses the sabbath day and declares it "holy..." Of course, this begs the question: Since GOD, the great "I AM," recognizes the need to rest and just "be," who are human beings to think we can or should just plow through, ignoring the call to receive the gift of restoration that comes from resting in the presence of God?! And yet "plowing through" is precisely what many of us do: We keep going long after we're already exhausted because we're constantly being prodded by a workaholic culture that judges us based on what we produce or fail to produce....

In today's reading from Mark's gospel, we meet up with Jesus at a time when he himself was thoroughly spent and feeling the need for a time of retreat and rest. If you were in worship last Sunday, you may recall from the gospel reading that Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, has just been senselessly murdered at the whim of the faithless and ruthless dictator, Herod. So, in

seeking to understand today's text, it's important to keep in mind that Jesus is in a state of grief when his disciples return from their first missionary journey. As he listens to the stories his disciples tell, Jesus discerns the weariness beneath their sense of accomplishment and excitement. He recognizes this weariness because he himself has experienced it. And as one whose life is intimately connected with the Spirit of God, Jesus knows that the work of mission and ministry can only be sustained when one makes time for prayerful solitude. I wonder: In reading the gospels, have you ever noticed that before Jesus makes any big decision or embarks on a new and difficult phase of his journey, he always goes off by himself to pray? [Show of hands if you've ever noticed that.... Yeah, some of you know what I'm talking about!...] So, in today's gospel reading, Jesus invites his friends to lay down their burdens, leave behind all distractions, and come away with him to a deserted place where they can spend some time prayerfully resting and being restored in God's presence.

Mark the Evangelist tells us that on the heels of this invitation, Jesus and the disciples immediately get into a boat and row across the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place. However, when they get there, the place is far from deserted.... Many people have seen them rowing across the sea and have raced around to the other side to meet them! Now, I can't speak for you, but I'm blown away and humbled by Jesus' response.... Even though he's grieving and he and his friends are exhausted and hungry, Jesus isn't at all frustrated or annoyed or resentful.... On the contrary, because he's so deeply rooted in God's love, Jesus feels only compassion for the crowds because they're lost—"like sheep without a shepherd." And so, nourished by the deep roots of God's compassion, Jesus gives the people everything they need: First, he shares with them God's life-giving Word, and later he feeds and provides healing for everyone who comes to him, no questions asked!... To state the obvious, teaching, feeding, and healing are the gifts of salvation: the gifts of God's saving love revealed through Jesus Christ.

Again, I'm amazed and humbled by Jesus' ability to show compassion for all the needy people who show up so unexpectedly. And it helps to know I'm not alone in feeling this way. In one of the preaching commentaries I read this week, Mennonite pastor Joanna Harader writes this:

...[H]ere, when Jesus' plans for getting away and being alone are ruined by this needy crowd, is a miracle we often overlook: Jesus has compassion for them.

Compassion. In the midst of his own exhaustion, he recognizes the weariness of those in the crowd. In his own need for renewal, he recognizes their need for healing. In his own longing for time away with God, he recognizes their longing to connect more deeply with their Creator.

Jesus responds to the enthusiasm of the crowd not with exasperation but with compassion. A miracle indeed. It takes a certain spiritual groundedness to recognize when you need to get away to a deserted place alone for a while. It

takes an even deeper spiritual groundedness to respond with compassion toward those who mess up your plans for solitude.¹

When I was reading Pastor Harader's words, I found myself nodding and saying, "Amen, sister!" And as I continue to reflect on the compassion Jesus shows toward the crowd, I'm becoming ever more aware of my personal need—and our collective need as followers of Jesus—to regularly and intentionally set aside sabbath time for rest and prayerful reflection in the presence of our God.

My friends, in these overwhelming days when you and I are worrying and caring for loved ones, as well as worrying and caring about the state of our community, our nation, and this world God loves so deeply, there's only one way we can stave off the danger of compassion fatigue and burnout. I can't overemphasize how vital it is that you and I make time to rest and be still—time to lie down in green pastures in the presence of our Good Shepherd, who will provide us with all that we need for the abundant life that begins here and now and endures for all ages....² You see, friends, as followers of Jesus, we're called to participate in God's ongoing work of healing and restoring the whole creation. This means that we must continue Christ's work by confronting the destructive, death-dealing lies of false prophets and cruel shepherds, who seek to rule God's people by fear and by "scatter[ing] the sheep of [God's] pasture."³ Indeed, throughout the gospels, Jesus teaches us that the only way to confront the forces of destruction and death is by embodying the power of love and compassion in our own lives.

Here a word of caution seems in order: As you and I confront and stand up to these cruel leaders and their acolytes, we need to be aware that they will not listen to reason; indeed, they cannot, for they're being held captive under the spell of conspiracy theories. With regard to this, we can learn much from German pastor and Nazi resistance fighter Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who during the 1930s wrote that the only way to overcome this captivity to conspiracy theories is through the liberating Word of the gospel that brings people into right relationship with God....⁴ My friends, this work will be daunting, and at times it may seem fruitless. But I urge you to take heart in the promise of God, who is making all things new.... Even though you and I cannot control the outcome, there is great hope in knowing that when you and I stay rooted and grounded in God's compassion—when we plant and water the seeds of compassion—in due time God will bring forth healthy growth, the Tree of Life, whose leaves are for the healing of all the nations.⁵

Thanks be to God, whose compassion is everlasting, whose promise is true, and whose Word will ultimately succeed in the purpose for which it's been sent: the purpose of giving life to this world God loves so deeply! Amen.

¹ Reverend Joanna Harader, "July 21, Ordinary 16B (Mark 6:30–34, 53–56)," In the Lectionary, The Christian Century, 15 July 2024.

² Cf. Psalm 23.

³ Jeremiah 23:1.

⁴ Das Bonhoeffer-Zitat aus: Widerstand und Ergebung, Neuausgabe 1970/1977, S.16-18

⁵ Revelation 22:2.