

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/19/2015, Pentecost 8B, Lectionary 16
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
“... and rest a while”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson we hear some lovely words about rest. St. Mark writes this:

The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” (Mark 6:30-31, RSV)

It's a good summertime theme, and I am glad for it. I do hope that you all get some good rest this summer.

As it turned out, Jesus and the disciples enjoyed only a brief rest. It seems to have amounted only to a hint and beginning of a vacation — not a vacation itself. Soon the work that needed to be done was upon them again. They tried to go to a lonely place apart, but it did not work. The people pressed upon them, and in his great compassion, Jesus could not turn them away. Our text reads this way:

³⁴As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34, RSV)

There goes the vacation. “That's okay,” I can imagine Jesus and the apostles saying. That's okay. God has given them strength to get up and do what needs to be done, and so they forego rest to another day. And perhaps to another day after that. And if they had had email, well, perhaps they would forgone rest forever!

Whether we have hard jobs or easy ones, sometimes we become weary and then our Lord's words sound especially sweet to us:

“Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” (Mark 6:30-31, RSV)

VARIOUS KINDS OF REST

There are various kinds of weariness in this world. Each one could use some rest. In this sermon, I begin with two kinds of weariness: weariness that comes from plain exhaustion, and weariness that comes from discouragement. And then I

end up by talking about a kind of holy weariness: weariness with sin and with vice. That is a good kind of weariness, one that could lead us to find rest in our Lord.

Let's begin with the weariness of plain exhaustion. It comes not from discouragement about the state of things, and not from the fatigue or boredom that comes from endless repetition, but simply from the near depletion of energy. Vacation time comes, and we are no longer like school children who burst out of school on the last day, brimming with energy and ready to dive into summer recess. Not us. We do not burst out into the vacation, but rather limp and stumble toward it.

We have been accomplishing our tasks, but it has taken more out of us in recent days, maybe in recent months, in recent years. Perhaps we are getting older and do not spring back as quickly as when we were young. Nighttime comes, and we fall into bed because we have used up that day's strength, but we do not always sleep peacefully or awaken refreshed, because our mind is in the rhythm of thinking about tomorrow's labors. Plus, we might have learned the art of brooding. When we should be sleeping and regaining strength, we are instead rehearsing in our minds how the day went, wishing that it had gone better, criticizing ourselves that we did not accomplish more or could not come up with the wise answer when some wisdom was really needed. We have not worked in a lazy or slipshod way. We have worked earnestly, but it has taken a lot out of us. We are depleted. My! The words of the Master sound so very good to us:

³¹And [Jesus] said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while."

If in some measure you are tired to the bone and about at the end of your strength, then have some mercy on yourself and try to give yourself a break. Our Maker knows something about our constitution, and he commands rest:

¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.
(Deuteronomy 5:12-14, NRSV)

Many important things are spoken of in the Ten Commandments: theft and murder and honoring our parents, adultery, and false witness, and so on. But this too is spoken of: rest. Get some sleep. You are not a robot, but a human being, and you need some rest.

DISCOURAGEMENT

But there is another kind of weariness that does not come from physical exhaustion, but rather from discouragement. A nap is not going to solve this.

I am thinking first of all of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. He is soul-weary — not bodily weary, but weary in his heart. He sounds depressed, as if he has seen everything on God’s green earth and none of it thrills him anymore. His complaint goes this way:

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.
(Ecclesiastes 1:9, RSV)

In theory, one could be glad to have seen everything “under the sun.” It means that you are seasoned, experienced, prepared for new developments because you’ve seen this problem before. And yet, sorry to say, it does seem possible for seasoning to turn into depression. It is possible to wake up in the morning expecting nothing new that day, nothing great will happen that day. It is just one day after another.

About this kind of weariness, it might help to realize that the old preacher is wrong here. There *are* new things under the sun. Or, just as important, there are old things under the sun which we have not yet seen, but they will do us good to see them. I think back to our best vacation ever for Carol and me: a trip to Italy — to Rome, Florence, and Venice — to celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I stood there among those old, old buildings of Rome, and I think I was never happier. And to walk in the plaza in Florence where Michelangelo played soccer when he was boy, and then to see the great sculptor’s David, and to see Brunelleschi’s Dome: my, it did my heart good! If you can, try to get out and about some. There *are* new things under the sun. There are some experiences, I am quite sure, that can refresh your soul. God has built a vast universe and adorned it with both natural beauties and beauties of culture. There remain good things for you to see, if you can gather the time and money for them. There are even good things to see close at hand, that do not cost much. So, do not succumb to the notion that there is nothing new under the sun. Things are not that bad.

INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS

But that down-hearted preacher in Ecclesiastes points to another cause of weariness in our world, and this is a cause that I think tugs on the heart of many earnest people: it is the discouragement that comes from working away at intractable problems -- problems that seem incapable of solution:

¹⁴I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and,
behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. ¹⁵That which is

crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. (Ecclesiastes 1:14-15, KJV)

This is a weariness that comes from struggling with vast problems. By contrast I think back to simpler times. I think back to a job I had when I was a young man, for example: I was the nighttime auditor at a motel. I worked the midnight shift, the graveyard shift. But I recall that no matter how tired I might have been when I arrived at my midnight office, those columns of numbers beckoned to me and awakened me and perked me right up again. It revived me to take on the nightly challenge of confirming all the receipts for the day and all the expenses for the day and working honestly until every line balanced and every penny was accounted for. It still pleases me to work with numbers. My wife Carol can never understand how happy I am when I am balancing the checkbook, how delighted I am when it all works out right. Those rational fellows – numbers! – have always been a pleasure for me to work with.

But much of life's work is not like that. Much work is devoted to complex, shifting material, under pressure from different angles, and explosive if errors of calculation are made — errors either of objective data or errors of tact or courtesy or skill in dealing with the multitude of personalities and temperaments of co-workers.

Think of the work of the researcher, for example, who is trying to solve cancer. All my life, people have been trying to solve cancer. Both my father and my mother died of cancer. I saw a subway advertisement recently that cheerfully said something like this: “There is no solution to cancer. There are a thousand of them!” — as if that particular hospital was the master of all thousand solutions. And I just sighed and went on. Those thousand solutions might not help the people I pray for and worry about. And I bet the researchers know that. For all our nation's wealth and learning, for all of our universities and brilliant scientists and up-and-coming graduate students, the word “cancer” still alarms us. The problems must be complex, and we should give earnest thanks in prayer to people who are working away at solving cancer. Some of them might spend their entire careers and never really reach a significant break-through. They work throughout the day, they fall into bed weary at night, they awaken and work away again, day after day, week after week, year after year. Their problem is not so simple as doing the nighttime audit at some small motel. They might never get to yell “Eureka!” It might even be rare for them to smile quietly to themselves and to know that they have advanced the research some that day. Even if their work goes unrecognized and they would be no good at writing an article for a scientific journal, still they know that they have advanced the cause in their particular laboratory and that their colleagues will be helped by what they have accomplished. But such quiet victories might be rare in the life of a researcher. Much of their work is more amorphous, and as the years go by, they grow weary.

Sometimes the ground is indeed rocky. You've been a diligent farmer. You've been sowing good seed, but the ground happens to be contrary, and you see little

reward. If you had been sowing on good earth, you could have been refreshed by seeing the young plants grow. But you seem to have been sowing on hard ground. You are a teacher or a principal in a school system, for example, and you care deeply about the children under your care, but everything seems stacked against you and against the children. Money is too short. Support is too short. Things are too loud. Lesson plans don't seem to pan out. Rules and administration take up so much time and seem to hinder good work that needs to be done. So, the years pass, and you suffer the weariness of discouragement.

And sometimes, the ground is good, but your colleagues are listless and lack enthusiasm and lack a sense of the great potential lying before them and you. It's hard to keep your spirits up. You feel as if you are fighting alone. So things become weary — not from under-work, but from half-hearted work.

Some of your days might be like some of mine, when Carol greets me and asks me how my day was, and the best construction I can put on things is that “It is probably better that I worked than that I did not work.” But it is hard to point to much concrete good that I accomplished. In some jobs there are uncertainties and ambiguities and too few times to actually claim victory. And if any good comes from the day, it is going to have to be because the Lord took charge and managed to wrangle some good from out of our poor efforts. As for us, we cannot see the good. Then the words of Jesus might sound awfully welcome to us:

³¹And [Jesus] said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.”

YOU DO NOT FIGHT ALONE

If these things have a ring of some truth to them for you, so that you could say to yourself, “Yes, I am weary and discouraged,” then please remember that you do not fight your battles alone. Do not imagine that all your work, all your career, will amount to nothing. If many of your colleagues are listless, know that you have one Colleague who is not. And in his name, great promises have been given to you. Let me lift up two of them. First, we have St. Paul's saying about those who labor in the Lord:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58, NRSV)

This promise is not meant just for apostles, saints, bishops, and other famous folk. It is also meant for any of you who do your job well and do it in the name of Jesus. That is your “high priestly work,” as Luther taught. It is your way of showing love for God and love for your neighbor. Your job is your chancel. It is your way of

laboring “in the Lord.” And the apostle wants you to know that “in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

My other saying also comes from St. Paul. This time he gives a promise to those who struggle with weariness:

And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season
we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. (Galatians 6:9, RSV)

Notice that little word “we.” We shall reap. God willing, our descendants shall reap too, and the work we do today, will benefit them tomorrow. Yet St. Paul is not speaking just of our descendants, but also of us. We shall reap! Let’s look for it. Let’s keep an eye out for it. Maybe it will take the form of an occasional compliment. If so, do not dismiss it. The few words that the boss or a colleague manage to put together in praise of your work might be the very word of encouragement that the Lord meant for you and wants you to take to heart. Or maybe you yourself will live to see some triumph. You have labored long and hard under the sun, and behold! You’ve actually had some success. Others might not understand your profession and not grasp the magnitude of what you have accomplished, but you understand it. You know that at last, you have reaped in due season. And if all that fails — if no one ever compliments you and you never reach a point of clear victory — still you will reap in due season. Have no doubt about that. The joys of eternity and the praise of eternity’s God, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” shall more than make up for things here below. You will reap someday. You will be glad some day. You will not regret your efforts someday.

WEARINESS WITH SIN

Let me end with a few words about a good kind of weariness: I mean weariness with sin. God bless the day when it comes to us to say, “I am sick and tired of this sin! It has been holding me back, holding me down, for far too long, and I am weary with it. I mean to cast it off! I mean to give this sin, this vice, this bad old habit a rest.” When that good day comes, then you and I are going to be in for an increase of strength, both in our bodies and in our souls. I think we are just going to have to admit that in some measure, we are tired because we have been sinning too much. It has exhausted us and rendered us poor husbands and wives, poor parents, poor workers in this world.

Then, turn with renewed love toward Jesus. In today’s Bible story, when Jesus urged his disciples to come away and get some rest, he did not launch them out in the boat by themselves. Rather, he got into that boat and went along with them. And well he should, for in the end, apart from Jesus, there is not true rest for us.

Some of us are heading out on vacation this summer. I hope you have a great vacation. But on that vacation, and when you return, remember to take the yoke of Jesus upon you, and you will find what you are really needing in this world:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle
and lowly in heart, and you will find *rest for your souls*.
(Matthew 11:29, RSV)

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the
Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.