

July 20, 2003
Season after Pentecost
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Compassion and Rest

Mark 6:30-34 *He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."
As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

This reading from Mark's gospel is a beautiful portrait of Jesus' compassion. Jesus shows compassion for his disciples, and he shows compassion for the crowds of people pressing in on him with their needs and lack of spiritual direction.

The disciples have returned to Jesus, who had sent them out by twos to share the Good News. Their preaching, teaching, and healing had brought comfort and wholeness to many. This was their first missionary work, and they return full of the experience of God's power and spirit having worked through them in the lives of people.

The disciples return exhilarated but tired. They have tasted both the adventure and the exhaustion of giving their lives fully to the call of Christ. They have not even had time to eat, says Mark. Jesus now says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Jesus has compassion for his disciples. He does not drive them continually. He does not want them to be compulsive and driven. He calls them to withdraw and rest. Jesus' yoke is to be light, not burdensome and heavy. "Come to me, all who are burdened, and I will give you rest," says Jesus in Matthew's gospel. (11:28).

Rest. The very word connects with the whole notion of Sabbath. The Greek word used here means to stop, to cease activity, to rest. Sabbath is a spiritual attitude of stopping and resting. The Sabbath reminded Israel that God rested after the labor of creation, and that we, too, must rest after our labors. Life must not be a continuous restless laboring, with no joy, no pause, no celebration of work completed. In a recent meeting of the Festival Center Mission group, a member reminded us to recognize and celebrate the things that had already happened—the Wednesday lunch meetings with so many people interested in the revitalization of the Western Hotel, the Servant Leadership School class with a diversity of people participating, the contacts already made with people living in the neighborhood. It is so easy when we respond to a vision and mission to focus on the future, on all the work to be done, and to forget to stop and celebrate each step of the way, each thing that God does through us.

In the summer of 2003, Kaye and I were in Botswana sharing in a workshop and retreat for persons working with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. People from Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe attended the retreat. Here were all these people committed to the overwhelming work of responding to AIDS in their own communities. The work to be done was enormous, seemingly impossible. And yet each morning and afternoon we stopped for "tea," a holdover from European culture that had been readily adopted by Africans. It seemed to me we were always taking tea breaks, which were usually lengthy and filled with visiting and conversation. How different from when we white Euro-Americans get together for workshops and retreats, filling them with incessant planning, evaluating, discussing, and general compulsiveness! I sensed that underneath the incredible pressure of the AIDS pandemic there persisted a sense of "Sabbath," of celebrating and resting along the way.

The Sabbath also reminded Israel that it is not by human effort that life is sustained. Sabbath rest recalls not only God's creation of the world but also God's continuing care and sustaining of the world. A Sabbath spirit remembers that life is ultimately in God's care and keeping. When Jesus calls his disciples away by themselves to rest he is reminding them that in his call that claims their whole lives there is also this underlying awareness that God is the one who is ultimately at work in everything. We are only participating in what God is already doing. Unless we pause, unless we cease activity from time to time and rest, we become filled with the illusion that everything depends upon us, that nothing will happen in this universe unless we do it. We become obsessed with notions of success and failure. We become controlling. In the process we become joyless, driven, and self-important, not the sorts of people others want to be around. We are to express by our own spirits the Good News of God's redeeming love for and care of the world in Jesus Christ. Thus we need to know the Christ who also calls us away to rest.

Jesus' call to come away and rest can save us from falling into thinking that everything depends upon us and becoming compulsive and obsessive people, unable to relax, to rest, to be joyful at the core of our being. Perhaps we need to add another discipline to those we take on when we become members of this church--the discipline of rest, of Sabbath, of taking time to practice what the old spiritual says, that the whole world is truly in God's hands. I don't know about you, but when I am running tired, not getting enough rest, eating on the go, inwardly oppressed by pressures and compulsions, I get pretty snippy! I don't like myself or my responses. When this happens I realize, "Man, you've got to back off and let God be God!" We need to get to know this about Jesus: he has compassion for us, those he has called to give their lives for his sake and the Good News. He will call us, from time to time, to come away to a deserted place and rest a while. And we need to be as obedient to that call as to his call to action.

But...just when Jesus and the disciples are finally getting away by themselves for a little retreat and rest, the crowds find them again! They get into a boat, cross to that deserted place. The people, however, spot them from the shore, and run around to where they are going. By the time Jesus and his disciples step ashore, the people are there to meet them.

Isn't that just the way it often happens? We finally talk ourselves into some time off, some time for rest, and just when we're sitting down with a book, the phone rings. Just when we're shutting the office door and heading home, we run into someone who needs to talk or some other kind of help. The needs of the world, the needs of people are always around us. The Sabbath that we take is no withdrawal into illusions about the condition of the world. It is a respite precisely from our wounded, troubled world, the world to which Christ calls us again and again.

Jesus is met by this great crowd of people pressing in on him. Their needs are many—physical, spiritual, emotional, political. Mark doesn't portray the crowds as wanting Jesus only for his miracles, self-centered and seeking someone to fulfill all their desires and wants. For Mark, the people are like sheep without a shepherd. Their political leaders use them for profit and power. Their religious leaders also make them objects of power and control, giving no real spiritual nourishment and direction. Seeing the people, Jesus is filled with compassion.

The word "compassion" literally refers to the entrails, or the "guts," to make it plain. The Greek word corresponds to the Hebrew word used to describe God's compassion (*rechamim*). That word literally means a movement in the womb, a

definitely feminine description of God. Marianne Kotopo is an Indonesian novelist, journalist, and theologian. In her book Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology, Marianne Kotopo describes an encounter she had with a professor at a theological school in Indonesia. They fell into an intense discussion of the feminine nature of God and the masculine translations of the Bible itself. She writes: "I asked him about the original meaning of *rehamim*, which is used for God's mercy, compassion...He admitted that it literally means 'Movements of the womb' (*rechem*). Neither of us knew of any males who possessed wombs, so my professor was persuaded that there might be a touch of the feminine here." (p. 66)

No experience is deeper or more God-like than compassion. This is what Jesus experiences as he sees the people--the very compassion of God. Compassion is not "feeling sorry" for people. It is not our reaching down in paternalistic ways to those we deem "needy." God's compassion is an active concern for the well being of people, arising from identification and solidarity with them. Christian compassion cannot become a kind of masked-over superiority, out of which we assume the inferiority of others and nobly bend down to help them. The compassion of Christ, which we as his followers are to share, is a deeply felt identification with all people as children of God. It is that "movement of the womb" in us as we see the needs of others. The compassion of God, which we as Christ's followers can share, is not philanthropy—loving and giving others from the safe distance of our security and affluence and comfort. It is the realization of our oneness with people and the desire to simply be with them in whatever ways we can to share life. Compassion is intimacy, not distance and separation. Compassion is community with others, not standing apart from them.

This little story, this little portrait of Jesus reveals his compassion toward us who have responded to his call, to give ourselves completely to following him and the mission of Good News he gives us in unique and varied ways. Yet we need also to listen to Christ when he calls us away to rest, to Sabbath. We also see Jesus' compassion for others, a compassion we are to share. Our rest may be interrupted at any moment by the needs of others. It is then we understand that our rest is always for the sake of keeping compassion fresh and alive within us.