

## Finding Rest for the Soul

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 19<sup>th</sup> July 2009

“Come away to a deserted place,” Jesus said, “all by yourselves and rest awhile. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”

Come away. Rest awhile. That was his command; but we often don't hear the text as a command, as an imperative, do we? We know of Jesus' other imperatives: “Follow me (Mk 1:17).” “Love one another (Jn 13:34).” “Let the children come to me (Mk 10:13).” “Forgive, if you have anything against anyone (Mk 11: 25).” But, “Come away. Rest awhile,” we don't hear this as a command – or even good advice – meant for our souls. We hear it as an option, or a luxury if we can find the time. We don't have time to break away, we think, to rest, because we're too busy, there's too much to do.

You can sense the frenetic activity in this text. The disciples have just returned to Jesus, eagerly reporting on their mission activity. Jesus sent them out to the villages, two by two, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. They were “coming and going,” Mark tells us, that “they had no leisure even to eat.”

Coming and going; forgetting to eat. No time for leisure. Sounds like our lives, doesn't it? We're coming and going, 24/7, and not all of it kingdom work. In our age we're coming and going and coming and going and at times not even sure where we're going or why or for what purpose. *The frenzied, feverish pace of our frenetic lives is one of the deep illnesses of our age.* People are working more and more. Even with our wealth and technological advances, we're still pushing ourselves harder than ever. “Time-off” or “down time,” or “leisure time” are becoming increasingly more difficult to find – and enjoy. And when we do take the time, we soon discover it's not enough.

Do we work too much as Americans? Are we too obsessed with work? When do we take the time to rest? Most Europeans, for example, have about thirty days of vacation each year: six weeks in Switzerland, twenty-five days in France; thirty days in Germany, plus holidays. They might not have the same standard of living as most Americans. They might not have as much as we do. From my time in Europe, it seems that they have a *quality* of life and approach to life, a far healthier balance between work and leisure, that we Americans could learn a lot from.

Thanks to the formation of unions in America – “the people who brought you weekends” – most Americans don't have a 10- or 12- hour work day or a six day work week (although those in upper management in corporate America certainly do). Since 1850, the average work week has been reduced by 31 hours. During the Depression in the 1930s there was a move to shorten daily work hours. Henry Ford (1863-1947) believed that shorting the work day workers would then consumer more in their free time. Today, vacations, time off for maternity (and paternity), and even “family leave,” are standards parts of a benefits package. With all this free time, why are we busier than ever?

The amenities of modern life don't necessarily enhance our experience of leisure. A community of Amish people were once offered a television set. Do you know how they responded? "If we were to add television to our lives, what would we take away? Conversation with our children? Reading? Praying?" They graciously declined.<sup>1</sup>

The average American works closer to 50 hours per week. But it's really higher. Add to this figure that many carry more than one job, have longer commutes (sometimes an hour or more in each direction), and then add the ubiquitous phenomenon of email and text messaging and Blackberries following us around, many are working even when away from the office. People are always in work mode, it seems, rarely, truly detached or distracted from work. It's always there.

This means there's even more pressure to make the use of "free time." Eight hours for work; eight hours for sleep; eight hours for recreation. That's how Robert Owen (1771-1858), social reformer and early founder of Socialism, hoped to carve out the day for those who lived in his social communal experiment in New Lanark (near Glasgow), Scotland – back in 1817. In 1836, crowds were marching in the streets of the U.S. demanding an eight hour work day (which didn't come until much later). For many today it's ten hours for work; six hours for sleep; maybe eight hours for everything else – shopping, chores, transportation, answering emails, helping children with homework, meals, reading the newspaper (if we even get to the paper), visiting the doctor, going to church, prayer – the list just grows. It's not surprising that people have stopped going to worship on Sunday because, as I hear (and at some level, understand), "It's the only day I can really rest." Saturdays are filled with chores; Sunday is the only day to sleep in, I hear.

Even prayer gets shortchanged because we feel we have to make the most of the "free time" we have, we have to be productive. Sometimes prayer seems like an inefficient use of one's time – for how can one judge its effectiveness? We have to be productive.

Even when we do take time for play or for leisure, it's rarely an *end* in itself. We're driven by results. When we're exercising at the gym is it for the sheer joy of exercising or are we doing it only because we want to lower our heart rate or bad cholesterol count?

We can blame our Puritan forbears for this. "Idleness is the devil's workshop." We can blame our Scots-Presbyterian forebears too. In his classic text on economics, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1725-1790), born in Scotland, known as the father of economics, and a staunch Presbyterian, believed that "activity is only truly productive if it takes raw material and makes it into something useful; the idle produce nothing."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Story told by Jim Rice, "Why Play: Contemplation, freedom, and the spirit of leisure," *Sojourners Magazine*, January-February 1997. Rice's extremely insightful article provides the contemporary social context for my reading of the Mark text.

<sup>2</sup> Rice's summary of Adams. The complete title of this text, the first modern work of economics was, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1776 in Edinburgh.

When we are idle or engaged in activity that doesn't produce measurable results – like prayer, meditation, or thinking, or contemplating, or worshipping or sleeping – then we soon feel guilty.

And so we work more and more – sometimes because we really love our work, but more often than not we work hard because we are driven, we have to, to improve our standard of living, to increase our wealth, to get out of debt, to provide for our families, to pay college tuition, or to prove to others or ourselves what we are really capable of. But at what cost?

Sleep deprivation is pandemic in our society. An article in *Psychiatric Times* entitled, “Sleep Deprivation, Psychosis and Mental Efficiency,” Dr. Stanley Coren, head of the Human Neuropsychology and Perception Laboratory at the University of British Columbia, writes that insufficient sleep takes a considerable toll on our bodies, on our mental health, and is potentially disastrous for others. The invention of the light bulb is partially to blame for this. In 1910, before the electric light bulb, the average person slept nine hours each night. In addition to the problem of financial debt in our society today, we're also dealing with sleep debt. Coren found “our societal sleep debt is so great that simply losing one additional hour of sleep due to the spring shift of daylight savings times can increase traffic accident rates by 7 % and death rates due to all accidents by 6.5%.”<sup>3</sup>

“Come away,” Jesus said. “Rest awhile.” Into the frenetic, crazed rush of our lives come these words, this gracious imperative:

### ***STOP!***

Come away. Rest awhile. Even the Lord of the universe, heaven-bent on the work of the kingdom, who commissioned his people to work, to serve, to follow, knows that in order for us to do the work God calls us to do, in order to be fully human – as Jesus was fully human – *we need to step away from it all and rest.*

Chart Jesus' movement through the gospel of Mark and you'll find a gracious rhythm here: work, then rest, in order to work, in order to rest. The rest wasn't doing nothing, because included it was a time to pray and to worship. In *compassion*, Jesus is saying to his over-worked followers, “Come away.” *You need to get away from the crowds and the endless expectations of others to a lonely place, a deserted place, or, literally, a private place.*

There's some resistance on their part, they seem to be extra-earnest in their endeavors. Read the text carefully. “Come away to a deserted place – *all by yourselves* – and rest a while.” “All by yourselves.” In other words, Jesus says to them, “Yo, I mean *you*.” I'm *talking to you, not to them, not to the crowds pressing in. You need to rest.* The literal meaning of “rest” here means, “to cease.” STOP. But implied in it is to cease, to rest in order to gain strength. The

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Coren, “Sleep Deprivation, Psychosis, and Mental Efficiency,” *Psychiatric Times* (March 1, 1998), Vol. 15, No. 3. <http://www.psychiatristimes.com/display/article/10168/54471>

word was used of soldiers resting and of land being allowed to rest, so that work, so that the bearing of fruit can take place at a later time and place.<sup>4</sup>

If you noticed, the lectionary reading skipped about twenty verses. In these verses, Jesus fed at least at least 5,000 people, *and* walked on water (!), and then in verse 53, healed the sick; wherever he went, people begged him for healing, eager just to get a touch of his cloak. Jesus packed a lot into a day. Even though he commands the disciples to rest here – and they had some time away together – the work of God continued, the work of compassion continues. Even though Jesus doesn't rest much here, we know he took time away to rest, to pray, to reconnect with God, to be grounded. Without that connection, that grounding Jesus, too, would have been consumed by the needs of the people, he would have succumbed to compassion fatigue. If Jesus took rest seriously, then we have to all the more. *The needs of God's people are enormous and never ending; we have to be prepared.*

We have to carve out time to rest – to sleep, to care for our bodies, but also to pray, to worship, to do those things that feed our souls, that open up and bring joy to the heart, that ground us, that remind us *who* we are and *whose* we are – and who we aren't and whose we aren't. We have to do this, because no one else is going to do it for us.

The psychiatrist, Carl Jung (1875-1961) was right, “Hurry is not *of* the devil; hurry *is* the devil.” Why? Because hurry takes us away from the things that matter and distracts us from the things of the heart – it takes us away from God. It's difficult to listen to God when we're on the go all the time. “How can we shoulder life's burdens if we have no contact with [Christ] who is the Lord of all good life? How can we do God's work unless in God's strength? And how can we receive that strength unless we seek in quietness and in loneliness the presence of God?”<sup>5</sup>

Hurried lives usually point to hurried hearts. I think contemporary pastor and writer, John Ortberg, is on to something when he makes this crucial connection, “Hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered heart.”<sup>6</sup> We all suffer from a chronic condition that plagues us from time to time: Hurry Sickness. And the “most serious sign of hurry sickness is a diminished capacity to love. Love and hurry,” Ortberg writes, “are fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and time is one thing hurried people don't have.” If we're hurried, sleep deprived, in need of rest – when we're “cranky, whiny, angry,” and even “sad” – it's very difficult to be compassionate, loving, and caring of the people who are right in front of us, around us, it's difficult loving God, loving ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

Come away. Rest. It's not a luxury in God's kingdom; it's a command. It's required. Like keeping the sabbath, it's a law designed to give us life. It's a word of wisdom and grace for

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<sup>4</sup> Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Clean L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 80.

<sup>5</sup> William Barclay's questions that emerge from his reading of this text, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 156-157.

<sup>6</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 84.

<sup>7</sup> “We get cranky,” “whiny,” “angry,” and “sad” – answers given by the children during the Children's Message, when asked, “What happens when you don't get enough sleep or rest?”

our souls. If only we can hear it as such. Jesus knows what's best for us. Stop. Cease. Slow down. Rest. Eliminate hurry. There's no indication in scripture that Jesus ever hurried. He knew the proper rhythm of life. And he invites us to do the same – “because, by definition, we can't move faster than the one we are following.” And – sometimes, just sometimes – the single most spiritual thing we can do – is sleep.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ortberg, 88.