

Proper 11B
Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56
Christ Church
19 July 2009

Grace and peace to you through our Lord, Jesus Christ!

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while:” Jesus’ advice and invitation to his staff. And is it any wonder? Today’s Gospel tells us that the apostles are just turning in their time sheets. The work continues to pile up around them.

And even as they go away with Jesus for a mini-retreat, the wounded and the suffering continue to seek them out – begging them for healing touch, an encouraging word, some reason to endure their plight. For the disciples, this ministry that Jesus entrusts to them is a bottomless pit of need – for these folks to whom they minister “are like sheep without a shepherd.”

**How many of us know the feeling of being overwhelmed?
How many of us live in agitation by all of the work that needs to be done in the Kingdom of God -- the care of our families, our coworkers, our employees, and those around the world who have next to nothing to live on? It seems that no matter how much we labor, there is always more that could be done and should be done to alleviate suffering in the world.**

How many of us take time to step back from our labors for rest and recreation? How many of us devote some time each day to prayer and quiet? How many of us insist that our children do the same? How many of us never get around to it because we are over-committed, over-scheduled, and over-stressed?

When my eldest turned five years old and was approaching kindergarten, I had him attend four weeklong summer camps: one for tennis, one for basketball, one for French, and Vacation Bible School. In August, he looked at

me one morning and said, “Mom, please don’t make me do four summer camps again.”

I thought I was doing a good thing by giving him all of these enrichment experiences. But, what he really wanted to do was play in the creek with his friend, Jud and picnic with lemonade and peanut butter sandwiches on the creek bank.

When my younger son was in second grade, a counselor asked him what he thought about school. His reply: “School would be a lot better if they gave you time to think!” The counselor and I agreed that this feedback should go to the School Board.

The point here is that we work and we push and we don’t allow the necessary downtime that fuels our imagination, nourishes our spirits, and allows for God’s activity in the silent language of the soul.

Jesus *insists* upon downtime for his disciples. I’m sure he knew that the human ego can become so attached to outcomes that the original intention to help someone is overshadowed by

the self-conscious drive to be a do-gooder. Ministry can become just another way to make the do-gooder feel important rather than a means for true healing and life-giving love.

It has been three weeks since our glorious celebration of new ministry. Many of my friends and family have written or called to say how moving they found our liturgy and our hospitality.

Our liturgy, which was the work of many dedicated hands, reflected our best hope as a parish: to be a people of varied cultures and traditions gathered as One, a community in Christ. The reception, likewise the work of many hands, reflected our desire to enjoy each other, to laugh and sing, to share in the nourishment of finely prepared foods and good wine, to find and form in one another bonds of lasting friendship.

How deeply grateful I am to be a part of this community and how excited I am to envision with you and work together on our emerging mission in Christ! The celebration energized

and strengthened us, and we have enjoyed the pleasure of basking in its success.

However, in recent days, I have experienced a coming tidal wave of new work and added responsibility. This surge is seasonal – the end of summer is not far off. Thoughts of school supplies, class schedules, projects to manage occupy our thoughts.

In the life-cycle of the parish, end of summer means program planning for the fall; stewardship sermons, budget reviews, space usage analysis. Our parish has come through a difficult passage and we find ourselves working on what our future will look like.

I was preoccupied by these thoughts when, a few days ago, I picked up a book that the Alban Institute gave me for applying to their program. The book entitled, “Paying Attention,” written by Gary Peluso-Verdend, is a study in congregational development. He has some very helpful observations about a parishes similar to ours.

Many Episcopal parishes, for a variety of reasons, have shrunk in size over the past decade. Peluso-Verdend observes that shrinking parishes tend to look to large thriving congregations for answers to their attendance problems.

Here at Christ Church, we do want new members. We do want to “grow” our parish. But Peluso-Verdend reminds us that “not every congregation is not called to be large. Every congregation *is called* to fulfill its particular mission, and to be faithful and effective, given its distinctive mission.”

Peluso-Verdend also speaks to congregations that were once big but are now smaller – like Christ Church. He notes the danger to us “when congregations like us look in the mirror and constantly see who they are not – which means they never deal with who they are, and consequently have no clue what the mission is that God has called them to in this time and in this place.”

Getting back to this morning’s Gospel: Jesus, knowing that the disciples are filled with zeal to do His healing work,

also knows that they must take time to reflect upon their work – to see if what they are doing is helpful – to see if their motives are pure – to allow their tired bodies, minds, and spirits rest and renewal. Without taking this time, they are sure to derail – to burn out – to give up in discouragement.

In the image of Jesus gathering his disciples into the boat so that they can get away from it all, I am reminded that we must do likewise. We must, before swinging into action, take all the time we need to make sure that what we are doing is what God would have us do.

We of Christ Church seek to reach out beyond our walls – to help the hurting and bring the love of Christ to others. In the process, I believe our parish will grow in size. But we must constantly explore a more important question: How we are going to “grow the church” in Spirit? When people visit us, will they feel loved and welcomed? When they look at us, will they see that we love each other? Will they be drawn to our community by our genuine love of Christ?

In these few weeks left of summer, let us climb in the boat with our Lord and go away to a quiet place so that we will not become as sheep without a shepherd, but a people rooted and grounded in Christ. *This* is how can we best make the marvelous and expansive healing love of Christ available to one another and to the world.