

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 21 July 2024 + Mk 6:30-34

This is the perfect time of year for us to listen to Jesus' instructions to His disciples in our Gospel today, when He invites them to *come away...and rest a while*. Now I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty good to me! But as we shall see, Jesus has much more in mind than to simply go on a vacation or enjoy a backyard barbeque.

So to begin, recall from last Sunday's Gospel that Jesus has just sent the disciples out "2 by 2" for their first real missionary experience. They preached repentance, they exorcised demons, and they healed the sick. And now the disciples return, likely very tired from their mission. And so Jesus, sensing their physical and spiritual fatigue, invites them to rest. Jesus Himself gets no rest, but the disciples do. And this is very instructive for all of us. In time of war, the combat troops are taken off the front lines every so often to help prevent battle fatigue. In the spiritual warfare of our lives, we too need rest and peace.

But finding true rest is not as easy as it may seem. We live in a time where many people think that they must be constantly busy in order to have a worth-while life. Another major challenge to finding rest is the temptation to constantly distract ourselves through technology. But constant busyness and distraction are not virtues. In fact, they are often masks that keep us from really facing the big questions in our lives we need to face but might prefer to ignore, and keep us from encountering the living and true God.

But even bodily rest is not an end in itself. Above all, we need time for physical rest in order to find spiritual rest. So where can we go to find this kind of rest? Well, Jesus invites His disciples to find their rest in "*a deserted place*." Now that might seem kind of odd, because we don't typically think of the desert as a place of refreshment! So what might Jesus be referring to here? Well, in the Old Testament, the "desert" is often a place of danger and testing. But it is also a place where God reveals Himself, where He provides for his Children, and where He speaks to those who are listening for His voice.

All of this is in the background of Jesus' invitation. The disciples are invited to go away into a deserted place in order to simply to *be with* Jesus, apart from the distractions and demands and noise of the crowds, to re-orient themselves to what is most important. I once went on a mission trip to the desert southwest. And one of the things I will never forget is how dark it got at night. Without "light pollution" get in the way, the stars appeared so near and so vivid in the pitch black of the desert night sky that I was awe-struck. It was nearly impossible for me *not* to raise my mind and heart to the Creator.

As disciples of Christ, we too need this desert time. We need to go to this place of encountering the Lord in silence as often as possible, or we will be enslaved to the dictatorship of noise and distraction that constantly vies for our attention and allegiance.

So, how do we find rest in the Lord? I think our Gospel today offers us 3 ways. First of all, the way of prayer. Prayer is our primary way of being with Jesus. Sometimes I think people are intimidated by prayer, or mistakenly think it is overly complicated and thus only for the spiritual masters. But at its heart, prayer is simply a relationship. And how do you have a relationship with someone? Well, you talk to them. You listen to them. You spend time with them. You do things for them.

Now, prayer will probably look different depending on your vocation and state in life. But everyone can pray: young and old, married and single, working and retired. I'll confess, I don't think my own prayer is that complicated. It involves a lot of asking for help. Asking for forgiveness. Saying thank you. Talking about difficult situations, asking for wisdom and insight, and trying, as best as I can, to be quiet and listen. I think anyone can do this. And I know that even when prayer is dry or I am really busy, I can't live without it.

The second way to find rest is cultivating silence. I'd like to talk about phones here in particular; not so much talking on them, but scrolling on them. As a quick aside, one of my biggest fears is seeing people looking down on their phones while driving. Evidently, that text is more important than the other fragile human lives sharing the road! At any rate, I was just thinking the other day, I am so glad there were no cell phones when I was in high school. Looking back, I can see it was so healthy, especially at the end of the day, to have a little time when I didn't have to keep up, measure up, and be aware of all I was apparently missing. No young person should have a smartphone in their room at night. And for all of us, while there are many positive uses of the internet, we need to be constantly aware of how our phones can lead us away from God and into some very dark places.

And that brings me to the last way of finding rest in the Lord: the way of beauty. We are so blessed to live near the country, where beauty is all around us. Anyone who stops long enough to silently gaze on the beauty of creation, in my mind, can't help but at least crack open the door of their hearts to our Creator. Notice how in our Gospel Jesus' disciples *went off in a boat* to be with Him. There's a reason why so many of us love the water. Not just water sports, but the rhythm and power and beauty of the water is captivating. It is no wonder water is a powerful sacramental. If we are silent, it leads to God.

Finally, we need to note that the disciples' rest didn't last all that long before the crowds found them. If our hearts are open, we instinctively seek out people whom we sense are close to God. People who have a sort of silence about them, and who are not easily agitated. People who radiate peace. People who you can tell pray a lot. Time with the Lord is not laziness. In fact, sometimes it is very hard work! It involves much self-discipline, spiritual warfare, and great patience. But thank the Lord we have such models of prayer among us: cloistered nuns, Sainly grandparents, remarkable teenagers, and so on—men and women all around us who lead us to the Lord, and remind us that our souls will only find true repose when they rest in Him.