

## THE VALUE OF BOREDOM

John 21: 1-14

Have you ever been bored?... Let's face it, every one of us has been bored on occasion, and maybe this is a time of life for you when you are experiencing bouts of boredom often. Why do we get bored? Maybe our work has become less interesting or challenging? Maybe there are tasks we have to do and routines that we have that are just getting tiresome. Maybe our studies no longer excite or even motivate us. Maybe there is a primary relationship in our life that soaks up much of our time and energy that has become lacklustre. Maybe we are in a time of transition, like retirement, where suddenly we have lots of time on our hands and we are in search of a new purpose that can meaningfully fill up our time and focus. Maybe we have suffered a loss of a loved one with whom we spent much time and now there is a vacuum in us seeking to be filled. Maybe we have lost an ability we had like our sight or mobility, and we can't do what we always loved to do like reading or going out among other things, leaving us wondering what we can do with our time that can be fulfilling.

Boredom is real and it can be difficult to navigate for every one of us. Is our boredom just a one off or is it a signal that something has to happen or change in our lives? Midlife is often a time when people rethink their career choices, relationships and other things in their lives. There is conflict and dissatisfaction for sure, but there is also boredom. The same things no longer satisfy. We need something new and different, something more fulfilling for our lives. We need to feel good about ourselves. Is this about changing something on the outside or changing something within ourselves in how we think and feel? Do we need to learn something new or grow something new in ourselves? How do we find that and get help finding that?

Well, this kind of questioning also requires us to think about boredom in another way altogether. Is boredom a bad thing, or is boredom an invitation to change something for the better? Is boredom a problem we need to fix, or is boredom an important time to keep open and wait? What do I mean?

There's a lot of research happening these days on the theme of boredom, and especially around the value of boredom. Why? Well, first of all, boredom is a reality everyone of us faces at some point. According to a recent psychological study coming out of the Mayo Clinic in the U.S, at least 60% of Americans claim they feel bored at least once per week if not more often. The stats are similar for Canadians. And such feelings of boredom are not necessarily because people have nothing to do or don't know what to do. Sometimes the people who experience boredom the most are people who are hyper stressed working all the time and then not knowing what to do when there are openings of time between working and doing. The impulse is to turn on some screen or scroll through the phone filling up any empty space of time.

But what if an empty space of time has incredible value in and of itself as empty space of time? What if protecting open space of time and making time for open space is essential not only for regenerating our brain but also rewiring it? What if stepping outside a constant treadmill of doing can help lead us into deeper wisdom of perspective and judgement, grounding our emotions to react less out of fearful impulse, frustration or stress? And in this regard, let's take some time to explore our scripture reading this morning more deeply. We can read through our reading in a surface kind of way. That's a literal way. Or we can take the time to go deeper exploring the metaphorical or spiritual behind the literal. Let's see where that takes us.

Even after Jesus has appeared to the disciples in their fear behind locked doors, spoken peace into their hearts, breathed into them his Spirit and commissioned them to go out and spread the good news of healing love toward saving wholeness to the world around them, they now seem to have lost their way again... They're back in Galilee to the north, back to what they used to do before they ever met Jesus, back to what is familiar, safe and routine – fishing. And so, Jesus has to show himself to them again. And what happens?

They're fishing, but nothing is happening. A whole day, evening, night and now morning and nothing has happened...All this time on the water, no phones or devices to scroll through... They're tired and hungry and bored... They've lost their purpose, their way... But then, what happens? Jesus happens, but they don't perceive that it's Jesus. They've shut off that possibility of recognition for some reason even though this is not their first encounter with him. Why is it that even though we've met Jesus and felt Jesus within, we fail to recognize him when he comes calling? Why is it that even though we've been stirred when we hear his story and listen to his words, and experience conviction, inspiration and motivation to live into something better, we end up back down in the doldrums all too often? Why?

Let's get back to our story. This stranger tells them to try casting their fishing nets on the other side of the boat. 'OK, why not?' they must be thinking. They've got nothing to lose given their bad luck already. But what then happens? They not only get fish, but lots of fish and so many they can't get them into the boat! It's at this point they wake up. Something is happening. In this open space of time, something is awakened in them. They recognize it's Jesus and suddenly they feel excited. Peter is so overwhelmed with joy he jumps out of the boat and swims to shore so impatient is he to get to Jesus.

OK, so if we read this story metaphorically, what do we perceive? What if open space is a time to regroup and wait in trust for something to happen? What if open space of time is not simply boredom to be feared or dreaded but a time to trust what will be given when it's ready to be given and when we're ready to receive it? It's hard to wait and to trust without a clear roadmap isn't it? What if doing the hard thing, namely waiting, is a great way to expand our horizons and our capacities? What if the one thing we need to hear, receive and follow can only be spoken into us when we're able to pay attention in open space with nothing driving us to fill up that

space with mindless fillers of noise or advertising? What if we need a clear head and an open heart and that can only happen when nothing else is happening?

So then, the disciples eventually get to shore with a load of fish and what happens then? Jesus has a fire going and breakfast cooking. He's going to feed them and eat with them too. They contribute some the fish they've caught with his guidance and direction, but they still need to eat and get refreshed by fellowship with Jesus. As the host he takes bread and fish, breaks it up and distributes it to them. A veritable holy communion they share right there on the beach. Jesus is among them and their purpose is reset and renewed once again. Yes, they are fishermen. But now they will fish for people as the hands, feet, voice and heart of their risen Lord.

But they need to figure out how this is going to happen for each of them and all of them together as community. What will the future look like? What steps do they need to take today and tomorrow? Will Peter still be the leader? What role will others have? How will Jesus continue to be among them? All of that is yet to be determined. But what matters now is taking this time, this open space of time to listen, pay attention and not fill it up with noise, anxiety and fear. Just trust in the moment and stay open... wait and see what happens...

Wow! OK, preacher. This is all easy to say, especially when you've got Jesus right there and then meeting that group of followers in the flesh and taking them by the hand in the face of their aimless boredom and loss of purpose and direction. What about us here and now? Yes we have our daily tasks and goals for our future. Yes we have our responsibilities and regular care of loved ones. Yes we have our work, our studies, our volunteer commitments, our health and fitness appointments and routines. And yes, we have our anxiety about the future and when certain things will happen for us. But then, we also have our moments of boredom when we just don't know what to do and we get caught up in unhelpful patterns of filling up the empty spaces with social media, screens, addictions, obsessions, and mindless wandering and worry. How may we learn to use our moments of what feels like boredom more constructively?

Let me quote from an article on the value of boredom I read recently: "Dare to let your mind wander," the author writes. "Consider leaving the phone at home occasionally. Spend focussed time with a friend, in person, or settle in with a long-deferred book. This way, society can optimize itself not for action or distraction, but for intention: for finding meaning or, at least, for understanding what meaning might mean for each of us. The philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote – in the 1650s, no less – that 'all the woes of humankind derive from one thing: not knowing how to sit still at rest in a room.'" And he ends the article in this way: "So don't just do something; sit there. Aim for quiet – which can feel like a radical act of protest in a world determined to distract you." Wow! Ok.

Seeing boredom as an opportunity and an invitation to be open, to wait, to listen and pay attention... a time to reflect, to step back from the treadmill and routines we do without thinking too much about why we do them... Christian mystics through the centuries have taught us that we receive the best gifts God has to give us when we are in a posture of receptivity... the word they often used is: “passivity”, and passivity in this more ancient way of thinking is not being helpless and inactive in the face of life happening to you. No. passivity is about waiting actively, expectantly and openly for something to be given to you... Being passively active... This also means we have to trust in that open space of time... trust that we will be told where to cast our nets, trust that there will be fish to find we never imagined we would and where we would, trust that we will be fed with fresh clarity and courage for our journey ahead. Trust.

So then, what do you think? Are you ever bored?... Is your boredom a sign that something must change if you have the clarity and the courage to change it? Or is your boredom an opportunity to sit and wait and open your mind and heart to trust what you may receive?... What discipline must you and I build into our lives, times where our devices are put away, times where we don't fill in the emptiness with mindless wandering or scrolling, times where we refrain from jumping into precipitous doing because we're anxious or afraid or impatient, so that we are just able to be? Yes, sometimes we do have to do something and change something in our lives. But we also live in a society where doing is a constant. How much do we need to learn the art of being, waiting, and refusing to call it boredom?...

Let us pray: Come to us, O God... Come to us in our fear and in our boredom... Come to us and teach us how to wait openly, expectantly and with trust in our hearts knowing you will speak to us, move through us and direct us when we are ready... Amen.