

MISSIONAL DISCONTINUITY

July 21, 2024

Psalm 23 & Mark 6: 30-34 & 53-56

Dean Feldmeyer

What is it with Americans and work?

We work, on average, 1,836 hours a year, more than just about anyone else in the industrialized world, and we take fewer vacations. 42% of working Americans don't take any vacation at all and, of those who do, 61% report that they were working when they should have been playing!

Paid time off makes up, on average, 7% of an American workers' compensation package but most workers don't collect all that they are entitled to. In fact, according to *Fortune* magazine, the average American worker leaves about five paid days off per year unclaimed. And if the company isn't buying back that unpaid leave, then workers who work on days when they should be off are, in fact, paying their employers for the privilege of working on those days.

For all kinds of reasons, some of which we will talk about in a few minutes, many Americans don't like to take time off.

I am not one of those.

I love vacation and I take every moment I can get. I like vacations on the beach and I like vacations in the mountains. I like adventure vacations that involve seeing new places and doing new things and I like going back to old, familiar and comfortable places to do the same old things that we do every time we go there. Yeah, I even like those "stay-cations" where you do local things that you never get a chance to do, like go to the Underground Railroad Museum or the Art Museum or the Aquarium. I don't think I ever met a vacation I didn't like.

And, according to the experts who measure and keep track of such things that makes me healthier, smarter, happier and more productive than those who martyr themselves on the altar of their job.

Another minister I know who likes vacations nearly as much as I do, calls her vacations "**missional discontinuity**." We go away, she says, so we can come back. We discontinue so we can continue better.

I wonder if Jesus had something like that in mind when he bade his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place by yourselves and rest a while."

NEWS FATIGUE

I'm something of a news junkie and, I gotta tell you, the last couple of weeks have been pretty stressful for people like me.

In Cincinnati there were two mass shootings in three days, three mass shootings in the past 6 months. Four different cases of parents and step parents and even foster parents intentionally abusing their children.

In politics, the Republican party, which lately has lived in a constant state of confusion, disagreement, and disarray has been, in the weeks before their convention, sitting smugly silent as the Democratic party self-destructs over who should be their nominee for the next presidential race.

And no matter how dysfunctional our country and our government seem to be, our southern border continues to be overwhelmed by people who are willing to walk thousands of miles and risk their lives to get in.

There's the shooting of Donald Trump's ear last week and the killing of one of his MAGA supporters and the wounding of another which has caused extreme indignation from politicians most of whom have said virtually nothing about the 187 American children and teenagers who have been killed by bullets so far this year.

Then there's the dismissal of charges against Alec Baldwin due to prosecutorial misconduct which, according to Bryan Stevenson in his book "Just Mercy" has become an epidemic in America, especially in the deep south.

The Grimm Reaper has been busy amid celebrities I grew up with this past week: Notably with the deaths of Richard Simmons (The Clown Prince of Weight Loss), Dr. Ruth Westheimer (Popular Sex Advice Psychologist), Actress Shannon Doherty of Beverly Hills 90210 (who was a dead ringer for my wife, Jean, when she was a teenager), and Actress Shelly Duvall ("The Shinning," "Popeye," "Nashville").

And don't even get me started on The Republican national convention in Milwaukee and the MLB Allstar Game in Texas wherein two of my Cincinnati Reds were featured.

Across the ocean, Russia and Israel seem to be in competition to see how many innocent civilians they can kill in achieving their military goals.

My diet soft drinks are, allegedly, making me fat, and they just discovered that my ibuprophen is going to give me a stroke or a heart attack or something, or not.

And if all these things aren't stressful enough, in and of themselves...

Every time I read a news story on my computer home page, when I get to the bottom of the story there's a place for "Comments." It's not enough to just read the story or listen to the story. No, now we're expected to have an opinion about what we just read or heard. Right now. Immediately.

It's not enough to be informed. We're also supposed to be outraged, indignant, excited, keyed up, worked up, fired up, overwrought, and generally all astir over everything we see the

minute we see it. Maybe that's why so many of those comments are so mean and hateful and nasty.

Because, what we really are is overwhelmed and, when we add that to the normal stresses of work, family and community life, we are also exhausted.

What all we need is a vacation. We need a vacation from the constant barrage of news that assaults us when we turn on our computers, from TV screens when we eat our lunch at McDonalds, when we get our hair cut, and even when we stand in line at the bank.

We need a vacation from the culture's insistence that we have an instant opinion about EVERYTHING.

But we are Americans and, as noted, we aren't real comfortable taking time off. Some of us are afraid that, as happened to a friend of mine, we won't have a job when we get back. Some companies offer time off but then create a culture of overwork so people are afraid to take their time off because doing so may put them at the bottom of the promotion list. Others say that the amount of work they have to do before they can leave and after they get back just isn't worth the time off for vacation.

And then there's the mixed messages that our culture is sending us.

Again, a Fortune magazine and the Harvard Business Review site studies that show the importance of vacations for the company as well as the workers, and how necessary it is that everyone take all of their allotted vacation time. They pointed out that people who do are generally more positive about and more productive at their jobs. Companies who encourage people to take all of their allotted vacation time tend to be more profitable and successful.

They also warn us that the average vacation does not improve energy levels or reduce stress. That's because most vacations are poorly planned and stressful and, thus, they eliminate the benefits of time away.

However, if you plan ahead, create social connections on the trip, go far from your work, and feel safe, 94% of vacations have a good return on investment in terms of your energy and outlook upon returning to work. Just make sure you plan the trip at least a month in advance, as one of the key predictors of vacation ROI is the amount of stress caused by not planning ahead.

Also, make sure you take ALL the time you're allowed. 95% of people surveyed claimed that using their paid time off was very important. And yet for the first time in recorded history, more than half of Americans (55%) left vacation days unused, which equates to 658 million unused vacation days. Take a moment for that number to set in. Imagine the impact those vacations could have on the U.S. economy — on airlines, hotels, restaurants, attractions, and towns — not to mention the impact it would have on individuals' stress levels.

If you are not taking all your time off, you're not working more — you're volunteering your time. And, "By giving up this time off, Americans are effectively volunteering hundreds of

millions of days of free work for their employers, which results in \$61.4 billion in forfeited benefits.”

Many people have become work martyrs, thinking if they give and give, they will be more successful. But it doesn't play out that way.

Remember in NBC's *The Office*, while trying to get a promotion from his boss Michael Scott, the awkward and overeager Dwight Schrute shows a spreadsheet documenting that he has never been late and has never taken a day off from work. He does not get the promotion. And that is exactly what the data bears out.

People who took fewer than 10 of their vacation days per year had a 34.6% likelihood of receiving a raise or bonus in a three-year period of time. People who took more than 10 of their vacation days had a 65.4% chance of receiving a raise or bonus.

As interesting as all that is, however, we Christians are not so concerned with what *The Harvard Business Review* says or what *Fortune* magazine says as we are with what Jesus says.

WHAT JESUS SAYS

In this Sunday's gospel lection Mark tells us of two stories where Jesus and his disciples are overwhelmed by the volume of work and the depth of need that has been set before them.

In the first story, the disciples have returned from their missionary journey upon which Jesus dispatched them in verses 6-13. They are excited and eager to share with Jesus all that has happened to them but there are so many people with so many needs coming to them for help that they don't have time to even eat their lunch, much less talk about what happened last week.

So, Jesus bids them “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” But their escape plan doesn't work. People see them crossing the lake in their boat and run around the shore to be there before the boat arrives.

When Jesus comes ashore, he sees that these people are “like sheep without a shepherd” and he has pity on them and “teaches them many things.”

The lectionary skips the story of the feeding of the 5,000 and the story of Jesus walking on water and calming the sea. That will come next week.

Instead, we jump to the end of that story and an event that is nearly identical to the one we have just seen. The disciples and Jesus have escaped the crowd only to be confronted by them and even more when they reach their destination across the lake. This time Jesus responds by healing people.

Let's be clear that the needs of the vast crowds of anonymous people are very real and very urgent. And there are lots of them. Quite specifically, Mark identifies two kinds of needs that are as real and urgent today as they were at that time.

In the first story Jesus sees that the people are like sheep without a shepherd. That is, they are leaderless, unfocused, unorganized, at odds as to what to do next and liable to get themselves into trouble if someone doesn't take charge and help them pretty quickly. Jesus sees that need and decides to help them and the way he helps them is by teaching them.

He does not take them by the hand and say, "Oh, you poor, poor thing." He does not empathize with their plight or enable them in their ignorance and lack of direction. He doesn't invite them to tea or tell them to "turn it over to the Lord." He teaches them.

The first need is for teaching, and it still is.

I truly believe that one of our greatest needs as a people and as the church is for education, and honest education at that. First, we need to teach and be taught an un-sanitized, historical account of who we have been and from where we have come.

We need to know the truth about our past. We need to have our stories painted in vividly honest colors and we need to see our ancestors as they were, "warts and all." We need to know about our mistakes as well as our triumphs, our moral lapses as well as our moral victories, our bad choices as well as our good ones, the things for which we can be proud and the things for which we need to apologize.

And we need to teach an un-sanitized Jesus. We need to give ourselves the freedom to learn and to teach that what Jesus offers is a radical, counter-countercultural, alternative to what the world offers. We need to know and teach that when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, sell what we have and give it to the poor, and follow him, he is not speaking in meaningless metaphors and ambiguous aphorisms. He is serious. He is giving us the very essence of what it means to be one of his disciples.

Only then, when we are well supplied with honesty and a sense of calling, can we begin to take care of the **second need that Mark identifies in those who sought out Jesus – the need for healing.**

We tend to focus on the physical healings that are identified here but there are many kinds of blindness, many kinds of deafness, and many kinds of brokenness, my friends, and I am convinced that the cure for many if not most of these ills can be found in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ can cure our broken relationships if we will place them before him. Jesus Christ can heal the blindness of prejudice and bigotry and enmity if we will but submit to his prescription. Jesus Christ can open our ears to love and joy and mercy and peace if we will but listen to him with our whole being.

The need for teaching and the need for healing are as real and as urgent, as authentic and as pressing now as they were 2,000 years ago, brothers and sisters. And Jesus is calling us to be the teachers and the healers now just as he called his disciples to do then.

But we must be careful in this worthy and holy pursuit. These same passages that call us to service also provide that there are times when we must take leave of service, even important and urgent service, in order to meet another set of needs – **our own**.

TOO BUSY TO EAT

I have probably spoken before of the theological significance of that warning they give in commercial airplanes as you are taxiing out to the runway. They tell you how to operate the oxygen mask should it be necessary to use it and then they say, “If you are traveling with a small child or a person with disabilities **put your own mask on first**, and then help those seated near you.” In other words, you are not going to be of any help to anyone if you are flopping around on the floor, gasping for breath due to an oxygen deficiency of your own.

Jesus says the same thing but in a different way:

The opening sentence of this story is the first time where the disciples are referred to as “apostles.” This is appropriate, as an apostle is one who has been sent and they are just returning from the mission field into which Jesus sent them. But being sent out comes at a price, does it not? Yes, they are excited to share their experiences but that same excitement can, if they aren’t careful, lead to burnout.

It is exciting to be needed. It is flattering when people come to us and ask for our expertise, our knowledge, our abilities. And we genuinely want to help, if we can, for helping others in need is almost the very definition of what it means to be Christian.

But the disciples in today’s story are so busy helping others that they cannot find the opportunity or the leisure to even have a meal together. They are sacrificing their own nutrition and their own health in their service to others. They are setting themselves up to be classic cases of burnout.

They have either forgotten or never learned the lesson of the oil lamp: It is not the wick that burns but the oil. As long as there is fuel in the lamp the wick will last a very long time. But when the fuel runs out the wick begins to burn and the fire soon goes out.

We are called to teach and spread the Good News of God in Jesus Christ and to heal the brokenness of the world, and we cannot afford the luxury of burning out.

The story speaks of food and eating but, again, we need more kinds of nourishment that which is supplied by fishes and loaves alone.

We need mental nourishment, the kind that comes from taking the time to learn something new about ourselves, about our religious faith, about the world around us.

We need the emotional nourishment that we get from spending time, structured or unstructured, with our friends and our families, playing, talking, listening, laughing and just basking in the warmth of their love.

We need the spiritual nourishment that comes from prayer and meditation and corporate worship and the study of scripture.

An old friend of mine, an avid fisherman, had a bumper sticker on his truck that said, "If you're too busy to fish, you're too busy." In the stories we heard, this morning, the Gospel writer, Mark, makes the same case for eating together. If you're too busy to eat together, you're too busy. And, by extension, he makes this point as well:

If, in our ministry to others, we find ourselves too busy to learn, too busy to love, too busy to worship, too busy to pray, well, then folks, we're just too busy. And it may just be time to go "away to a deserted place... and rest."

AMEN