

“WHEN YOU CAN’T GET AWAY FROM IT ALL”

Mark 6:30-44, 53-56

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Over the years I’ve become attached to a number of characters in the funny pages of newspapers. One of my all-time favorite comic strip characters is Fred Basset. You may not know Fred because he doesn’t appear in the Waterbury paper; but he is a lovable basset hound who lives with a married couple and offers a dog’s eye view of the world. His view is often very insightful!

In one memorable episode, Fred is walking behind his female owner on a country lane. He comments, “The idea was to take a walk in the country to get a little peace and quiet.” In the next frame Fred says, “No such luck.” He looks back to the woman’s husband walking several steps behind holding a radio to his ear. A loud voice on the radio is saying: “. . .which puts Pittsburgh in a very strong position with only two innings to go.” He is listening to a baseball game! He sets out to escape the activity and noise of the city, but he winds up bringing the activity and noise with him.

It’s hard to get away from it all, isn’t it? Having lived in large cities for much of my life, I’ve known a lot of people like Fred Basset’s owner. They work long hours during the day, and then bring home a bulging briefcase or toolbox at night. They work not only at the office, but in the restaurant, the airplane, the hotel lobby, the lake house, and – thanks to cell phones – even in the car driving 70 miles per hour. These people work 5½ to 6 days a week, then take a so-called “day off” that is really on. Their vacations are really extensions of their vocations. A lot of folks today define “leisure” as going somewhere to rub shoulders with thousands of other tourists. On any given weekend, they engage in play that is just as intense and competitive as work.

Have you noticed? So far I’ve been talking about “those people,” about them. But you and I don’t get off the hook so easily, do we? Even if we choose to live where Fred Bassett and his owners only visit, even if we live on a country lane in a small town like Woodbury or Southbury, it can still be hard to get away from it all. I suspect that when you settled in this area, you made a deliberate choice to live outside the urban jungle, perhaps to raise a family or retire, but also to escape the rat race, the congestion, and the crime. And what did you find? A lot of other people had the same bright idea, and they brought with them some of the ugly problems of city life. You and I can get stuck in traffic just as easily on Route 6 as we can on I-84! Did you know that, statistically, the use of illegal drugs is more prevalent in rural areas and small towns than in big cities? Apparently, some people find life in the boonies to be boring, and they go looking for an adrenalin rush. The fact is, no matter where you live, even if you live “far from the madding crowd,” it’s hard to get away from it all.

This predicament may sound very modern, as if we were the first generation to experience the pressure of the clock and the press of the crowds. Perhaps we can take comfort from the fact that we didn’t invent this pressure, that it’s as old as the human condition, that it’s something that the writers of the Bible understand and address.

In the 6th chapter of Mark, Jesus sends his disciples out on a mission of preaching and healing. The disciples are like apprentices in a trade or business. For the first time, they are leaving the classroom for on-the-job training. They travel through Galilee, doing essentially the same work as their Master: preaching repentance, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Then they return to Jesus and report on their eventful trip. No doubt they are excited, but they are also exhausted. They unpack their bags and hope to enjoy some “down time” – you know: the quiet, cozy fellowship of “home, sweet home.” But, no! Mark tells us that when the disciples return to their Master, they get no reprieve from pressure: “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (Mark 6:31b).

I know that some of you work at a job that puts you on the front line with people all day long. Perhaps you teach school or run a business or work at a busy desk where there is lots of human traffic, and it’s talk, talk, talk, 8 to 10 hours a day. When you come home at night, what you need is solitude and peace and quiet. You need to put on your slippers, flop into an easy chair and watch “Wheel of Fortune” or whatever else you do to unwind. The last thing you want is to be with people. But perhaps you have a partner at home who works alone all day and is hungry for companionship and wants to talk in the evenings. Or perhaps you have children who need to be driven to a soccer game and helped with their homework and fed and put to bed. What you want is Shady Hollow, but what you get is Grand Central Station. Isn’t this the picture of a lot of American adults at the end of a long working day: “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat”?

Of course, having no leisure to eat is a small result compared to having no leisure for living in the deepest sense, no leisure for the spirit to expand. When life is nothing but coming and going in a crowd of people, you and I lose touch with ourselves. In fact, we may never develop a self that is worth staying in touch with. There is truth in the modern fantasy of a man who vanished into thin air the moment everyone else had left the room.

So the disciples return from their working trip and immediately find themselves overwhelmed by people and problems on the home front. Jesus decides that his comrades have had enough activity and commotion, at least for the time being. So he invites them to get away from it all. He says to the twelve, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (v. 31a). Notice the two-fold prescription here: it is both spiritual and physical.

First, Jesus invites his disciples to spiritual solitude. He says, “Come away . . .” But to where? “Come away to a deserted place . . .” But with whom? “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves.” Notice: not to Quassy Park or the Danbury mall or even to church, but to a deserted place (other translations say, “a lonely place); for it is there, in private, not in public, that we recover our sense of selfhood.

What complicates the matter for some of us is that the deserted, lonely place is the very place we are accustomed to. We live alone, not by choice, really, but by circumstance, and it’s not easy living a solitary life, to have no one to embrace or de-brief with at the end of the day. Jesus says, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves,” and some of us want to say, “Enough already! I’ve had my belly-full of being by myself and living in a deserted place.”

This is why a lot of people go to such great lengths to avoid being alone. When we are by ourselves for very long, the demons seem to come out of the woodwork – the demons of grief

and worry and fear – and so we tend to fill our time with chores and activities and engagements. We turn on our CD players or TV sets so we don't have to endure the sound of silence, so we don't have to be totally alone.

I love the story Willie Morris tells in his autobiography *North Toward Home*. Morris and his buddy, Tom Sutherland, go to visit an old friend who lives alone in a farmhouse in the Mississippi countryside. He is a retired judge and has been a widower for several years. They stand on the man's front porch, looking out on the fading afternoon. "We moved into this house in 19 and 14," the old fellow says. "My wife and I raised five children here. I miss the sound of their voices. Now I'm alone, and I tell you, brother, it's pretty sad." He opens the screen door and starts to wave goodbye. Morris's friend Tom replies, "Judge, you're in excellent company even when you're by yourself."

I wonder if that's true of you. Are you in excellent company when you are by yourself? God knows, some of us need to find out. Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves" – for it is there that we truly meet ourselves, and it is there that we are able to hear the voice of God.

Now notice the other part of Jesus' invitation: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves . . ." And do what? "And rest a while." Along with spiritual solitude, Jesus prescribes physical rest. On several occasions in Mark we see Jesus withdraw from the crowds for privacy. But here he is not seeking solitude for the purpose of instruction, recreation, or even meditation. He doesn't call the disciples aside for a lecture on theology, a game of volleyball, or an impromptu prayer meeting. For once they have done what he has asked them to do; they have done it faithfully and well; and now he invites them simply to rest. Jesus' invitation reminds me of the sage advice someone gave to his very busy friend: "Don't just do something; sit there"!

Well, Mark tells us the disciples accept Jesus' invitation: "they [go] in the boat to a deserted place by themselves" (v. 32). So far, so good. But read on: this is not really a story about leisure, rest and renewal; it turns out to be yet another story about work, pressure, and perseverance. Jesus and the twelve have the best of intentions as they set sail. They need peace and quiet, and they do something specific to meet this need. But when they get to the deserted place, it is no longer deserted. It is trampled over by the milling mob. The very crowd they have sought to escape has run ahead and arrived on the shore ahead of them. The whole purpose of the trip is spoiled!

Many of us can tell stories about holidays that were anything but holy days. We've set aside times for rest or recreation that didn't go according to script. We know what it's like to abort a vacation because of car trouble, bad weather, sickness, a crisis in our workplace, or a family emergency back home. What's more, such misfortune is not limited to special occasions. Our best-laid plans can get shot on ordinary days as well. And when they do get shot, the question becomes, how do we react? When Plan A is blown to bits, do we have a Plan B?

"And as [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (v. 34). This is not technically a miracle story, but Jesus' reaction is something of a miracle. The leisure he so desires and deserves is rudely denied; his privacy is invaded; his rhythm of work and rest is disrupted. But here is the wonder of Mark's story: Jesus is moved by the crowd to compassion,

where anyone else would be moved to irritation. How natural it would be to give way to impatience and exclaim, “Can’t they leave me alone for just one hour?” But looking at the crowd, Jesus sees into the hearts of individuals, and for the moment lays aside his own needs in order to meet their needs.

You see, Mark’s story is really addressed to two kinds of folks. There are those who need to get away from it all, but won’t; and there are those who want to get away from it all, but can’t. Let me ask you: how do you react when you want to, but can’t – when your morning quiet time is interrupted by a phone call; when your special weekend with relatives is cancelled because someone comes down with the flu; when the hour you have reserved for your favorite hobby is pre-empted by a friend in need? Which comes most naturally to you, compassion or irritation? Do you tend to lose your patience with people when they get in your way or thwart your plans?

“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Friends, if you have ever been lost or hungry or defenseless, “like sheep without a shepherd,” you know how much it means to be found and fed and protected. Jesus never could have saved you if he had stayed on vacation.

May the Good Shepherd teach us when to withdraw from people and when to reach out to people, when to care for ourselves and when to care for others. When you need to get away from it all, by all means try to do it. When you can’t get away from it all even when you try, trust God to give you the strength to hang in there and be a helper. And then, in his own good time, the Good Shepherd will lead you to rest.