



July 21, 2024

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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Grace, mercy and peace to you in the name of the one who gathers, calls, nourishes and restores. Amen.

My name is Deacon Michelle Collins and I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop in the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod. I want to acknowledge that I live and work in Winnipeg, which is on Treaty 1 territory, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Dene, and Dakota people, and the homeland of the Métis nation. I am grateful for this land and the invitation to participate in reconciliation and restoration of this place.

I want to begin with a word of thanks for all the bishops and synod staff who have participated in this summer sermon series, and for all those across this church who have taken advantage of this series. It is inspiring and encouraging to hear from a variety of voices in our life together.

There's a pithy saying I picked up somewhere along the way that goes, "The interruptions ARE the ministry." Today's gospel reading is an example of that saying. Jesus' disciples have returned from being sent out, the political pressure around Jesus is rising, and Jesus himself is grieving the tragic death of his cousin John the Baptist. The disciples—and Jesus—are feeling emotionally, physically and spiritually spent, and Jesus appropriately recommends that they take a beat to recover. He suggests that they get away and rest.

You likely know what it's like to need a break. Whole industries have developed around providing rest, respite, retreat and restoration. I get more auto-replies about colleagues and friends being on holiday in July and August than at almost any other time of the year. Rest is important to our wholeness, and even those who are "doing the work of following Jesus",

need rest. Many of our congregations are weary from faithfully trying to serve and support their people through trying times. Jesus knew that the ministry he was inviting folks into was emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausting, and he modeled that restoration was not just a spiritual goal, but a physical necessity.

But the interruptions ARE the ministry. As the disciples try to go away to a deserted place, the crowd finds them. And when Jesus sees the crowd, he has compassion on them. Mark writes that Jesus sees them like sheep without a shepherd. If we've been in the church for any length of time, we're familiar with references to Jesus being the Good Shepherd. But this is not Mark's way of saying the crowd was spiritually "lost" because they hadn't "professed faith in Jesus". More likely, Mark is making a comment about the political, social and economic condition of the people. There were ways in which the designated leaders were failing to meet the physical, social and economic needs of their people, leaving them like sheep without a shepherd. When Jesus witnesses people who are being denied well-being and justice—whether they are his disciples or whether they are the crowd that finds him—he is moved with compassion and compelled to respond¹. And as he responds, more people are drawn to him.

Jesus doesn't go out and chase people, forcing his healing on them. But something about him and how he navigates his environment is magnetic, and people find him. In our reading today we see various ways that Jesus invites those around him into wholeness and restoration. He encourages those who are overextended to take a break and rest. He sees the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering of those who are seeking him, and is moved with compassion. He teaches. And those who touch his cloak or are brought to his attention are restored in whatever way they need it. There is healing and restoration when people get those who need help to the one who can help.²

As congregations are trying to figure out what we are being invited to do in our communities to share the message of God's presence and love, Jesus again models some practices and rhythms that provide us with some guidance. We can encourage those who are overextended to take a break and rest. Ministry—whether it's being done for salary or as a volunteer—is exhausting, and we are encouraged to take a break. Congregations can become over-extended by being unwilling to let go of anything and insistent on doing it all on their own. Volunteers can become over-extended by never stepping away from a role for fear the work won't get done. Clergy can become over-extended by not sharing the work of ministry with the whole community and not leaning into collegial support. We can get overextended and exhausted—as individuals and as systems—and can end up "coming and going, with no leisure even to eat." Jesus models that it's okay to stop. It's okay to let programming go for the sake of rest and restoration. It's okay to share the ministry with others—even if they do it differently or imperfectly. It's okay to step away from a beloved volunteer role. It's okay to take a break from the "work" of ministry.

¹ Matt Skinner, Commentary on Mark 6:30-34. 53-56, July 21, 2024. Workingpreacher.com

² Matt Skinner

Because maybe it's in the taking a break, that we are able to see clearly those who are in need of healing and restoration. Maybe if the disciples had not stopped the frenzy of ministry and gone across the lake, they wouldn't have met the crowd that was hungry. And although what happens next isn't in our reading for today, if they hadn't met the crowd, they wouldn't have experienced Jesus feeding the crowds with just a few loaves of bread and a few fish, or witnessed Jesus walking on water and reminding them that whatever storm might surround them, they are not alone and are not without hope.

Sometimes we can get so caught up in doing the work we think Jesus has tasked us with, that we miss the invitation to step away, take a break, and witness the new thing that God is up to as God continues to encounter with compassion the pain and suffering in the world and responds with hope and restoration—in ways that go way beyond our imagination.

The interruptions ARE the ministry. When we think the work is to keep our congregations alive by repeating old patterns and holding tightly to methods that are no longer drawing people into our spaces, the interruptions might be looking outside of our walls for community organizations in need of space, marginalized communities asking to be seen and heard, or ideas for innovation from those who don't look or sound like us. As we follow Jesus—even when Jesus invites us to stop and take a break—we might just see the new thing that the Spirit has for us, and we might be reminded that the Good Shepherd knows their sheep by name, seeks out the sheep that have strayed, gives their life for their sheep, and then invites us into the work of tending, feeding and loving. The healings, the casting out of demons, the miraculous feedings, and the teaching are all ways the Son of God is shepherding people into an awareness of God's love and presence in the realities of daily life³.

Jesus is interested in human flourishing—not just eternal salvation. There is a relationship between the gospel and wholeness. Throughout his ministry he is keenly aware of the very real physical, emotional and spiritual suffering that people are experiencing. And he offers them the restoration that they need. For some, it's an invitation to rest. For some, it's a time of teaching and remembering the promises and faithfulness of God. For some, it's healing and restoration of pain, doubt, disease, and loneliness.

The same is true of us. We get overwhelmed and exhausted by the stuff of life. Our pain and suffering, or the pain and suffering of those around us, doesn't have a quick fix. The systems of injustice continue to affect those who are vulnerable and marginalized. It's easy to feel like we are the sheep without a shepherd.

But Jesus is here for all of it, and continues to Shepherd us into the love and care of the one who can heal our pain, give us rest, and restore us in body, mind and spirit. And when we

³ Elizabeth Webb, Commentary on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, July 19, 2015. Workingpreacher.com.

participate in engaging and encouraging rest, in teaching and learning, in healing and restoring, we make real what God did through Jesus

When we gather together around Word, water, wine, and bread, and when we share the gifts of God with the people of God, we are renewed and restored, and we share renewal and restoration with others. That's the life of discipleship to which we have been called. And along the way, we are likely interrupted by the pain and hunger of the world around us, a world desperate for a reminder that the Good Shepherd is still shepherding them and they are known and loved. Those interruptions invite us into a deeper understanding of who God is and how we are being invited to join God in the work of healing, feeding and restoring. Because, after all, the interruptions ARE the ministry.

May the invitation of the Good Shepherd to rest, be restored, and be made whole sustain you today and every day. *Amen.*