

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist way of life, once received a letter from a hard-working Christian woman who was bemoaning the fact that in spite of all her work in the church, she seemed to drift further and further from God's presence. She said that she felt separated from God and unappreciated in the church. She had lost her focus. Expecting encouragement, she was astounded to read his reply: "Madam," he wrote. "You say that you arise at six for study and prayer. Perhaps you need to wake at five. You say that you visit the prison twice a week. Maybe you're the sort of woman who needs to visit four times a week." The letter continued without an ounce of compassion. He said to her, "Get busy! Get moving! Stop your moaning. Work! Discipline." There was no watching the grass grow or smelling roses for Wesley. If you want to get close to God, his advice? Get busy!

Well, when I look around the church and meet with various leaders, watch the ladies come in every other week to assemble the newsletter, see our children run to Sunday School and our ladies meeting and planning along with all the boards and committees, I'm not sure we want to hear from John Wesley this morning. Or ever! To be frank, since I love the theology of Luther who spoke of faith and grace, as well as so many contemporary theologians, and believe also in the wisdom of intellectual pursuit, I think we can let Wesley rest for a little while.

Yet, as Americans, we seem to have fallen into a pragmatic, utilitarian lifestyle. We are big on doing! Think about it. When someone is sick, we ask, "What can we do?" When someone dies, we want to step in and do something – make arrangements, calls, bring food. Something! When a crisis happens anywhere around the world, we wait and watch and we want to respond.

Yet, this morning's Gospel seems to take us in another direction. In the midst of his teaching, Jesus withdraws. He retreats to a deserted place. In one of the busiest sections of the Gospel, Mark uses the word "immediately" Numerous times, we find Jesus gathering his disciples into the boat to take a little vacation. Or at least try!

Ever had that happen? Last summer, my daughter and her husband and children came to Nantucket Island for a shot visit, but the days seemed to fly by. I would work in the morning while they drifted around town checking out the stores and beaches, and the afternoon was spent as a family. We seemed to run from one thing to another, from grocery store to bait shop, then the fish monger for fresh fish (Herber didn't have much luck) that we cooked on the grill. All of a sudden, the week was gone and I was putting them back on the ferry. Where did all the time go? We were certainly doers! Yet, as I reflected on our time together, I realized that my favorite time with them had nothing to do with "doing." It was when Heidi would come into my bedroom in the evening, lie on the bed with me and just talk – about kids, motherhood, life, anything. And my times when those two sweet little boys would climb into my bed and sit on either side of me as I read a story. Moments in true relationship. That was what mattered.

Reading this Gospel was like a breath of fresh air. Jesus has been busy, but now he declares, "It's time to rest. Let's go to a deserted place a rest a while. Let's just lay around a little. Catch our breath." I like that part. Jesus on retreat. The disciples shared with him all they had been doing and now he wanted them not to do!

You see, I think there is a message here. In all of our busyness, it is also an act of faith to disengage, to withdraw from our regular activities, and think about our priorities. Think about our own health, our families, make a plan for the future so that we don't get so caught up in day to day activities that we forget the importance of relationships. We are bombarded with messages about responsibility. At the airport one day, I saw a sign that read, "You've got the whole world in your hands. Only you can solve world hunger." Well, I certainly believe that we should all feed the hungry, but that message is the antithesis of the Christian message - to believe that we do it alone. Are we really the only ones who can do the work of Christ? Is it only up to us to do it right or it won't get done at all? Are we really the only ones who can fix the world?

So Jesus and his Disciples retreat. But, that desert was anything but deserted! He had been teaching and the crowds saw them go – and they wanted more. They were so hungry for knowledge, and the presence of God.

In spite of myself, I like that part as well. As much as we want to lie down somewhere and sleep for a few days, there are still needs. This Gospel also gives us some direction. Did you hear it? "Jesus had compassion on them." I believe this is the crux of the Gospel message this morning. This Gospel is not about doing. It is not even about a miracle. This Gospel is about giving our lives and the world over to God.

Not too long ago I worked with a mother who was suffering the ravages of her daughter's drug addiction. She had done everything she could think of – paid thousands of dollars on lawyers, treatments, paid bail money each time she was arrested. And she was so distraught. I said to her, “When is it enough? When do you finally let her suffer the consequences of her actions?” She looked at me through tears and said, “If I don't save her, who will?” I asked her then, “Do you believe in God? Or do you believe only in yourself? Do you really believe that it's only up to you to save her, to make her do right, go back to school, redeem her life?” It takes a lot of faith to give a child over to God – to let them go and begin to live their lives, especially when they have struggled.

While I served the church on Nantucket, several young people committed suicide. It was a crisis that called for specialists to come from Harvard University to help the community cope and try to understand why this was happening. One young mother came to my office and said, “Joy, I'm afraid. I'm afraid for my children. What can I do?” We talked about different approaches. I suggested that perhaps each parent could encourage their child to choose a surrogate, someone they could talk to if they felt there was something they couldn't share with their parents. That perhaps if there was one back up person they could call no matter what, that would be a start.

Certainly, as parents we want to be the one they talk to. But can we trust that someone else might also be there? It does take a village. We cannot always be enough. It takes faith to give a child over. It takes faith to retire and allow others to pick up where we left off. It takes a lot of faith to allow someone else's idea to take hold and bear fruit when we think our idea is better. It takes a lot of faith to give oneself over in marriage not knowing what the future will bring. It takes faith to bring a child into a dangerous and confusing world: faith that there is a God; faith that the ultimate fate of the world is not up to us alone.

Jesus was a worker to be sure. He healed, preached, taught, fed multitudes, but he also knew that at times, he must withdraw and rest. Even on his last evening with his disciples, he withdrew and asked some to keep watch. He needed time with God. What he did was never as important as who he was.

Sunday mornings, especially Communion Sundays together are so important. This is our opportunity to withdraw for a little while; to be totally focused on God's presence and God's love for us, not on what we do – not on us, but on God.

When I was serving a Church in Michigan years ago, we gathered prospective members and asked them how they could see themselves serving the church. Louise raised her hand. In her other hand was a white cane which helped her find her way. She asked, “Joy, since I lost my sight, I don't think there is really anything I can do to be helpful in the church other than giving money. While working, I edited a magazine, but without sight I can no longer do that.” I looked at Louise and remembered the wonderful telephone conversation we had the day before about a friend who needed prayer, and so I asked her, “Louise, could you pray?” She said, “What do you mean?” I said, “If I discover someone in need of prayer, could I give you a call and have you pray for them?” Her face lit up as she smiled from ear to ear. She said excitedly, “Oh, yes, I can do that! Thank you for thinking of that.”

We do what we can do in word and deed to bring the kingdom of God into our world. But then, sometimes, it is good to sit, do nothing, and pray. To remind ourselves that the world is not just in our hands. After we eat and drink and pray together, perhaps we need to just sit here for a while, to pray. Perhaps our task is not always to do, but sometimes just to be. For God. And for one another. Amen.

Sermon preached by:
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