

Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11  
Mark 6:30-34

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania 19333  
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## FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Jesus said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." *Mark 6:31*

For many years the Jewish word "Sabbath" (*sabat*) has attached itself to a legalistic form of Christianity of the sort that favored blue laws and the denial of anything on the Lord's day that smacked of frivolous enjoyment, like purchasing something on a Sunday, or taking a glass of wine, or, God forbid, dancing!

Yet in a gratefully widening circle Sabbath has undergone a lovely metamorphosis, casting off its hard and crust shell of rejected pleasures, to a different iteration. Sabbath has come once again to mean "rest," a holy rest of immersion in quietness and contemplation.

Barbara Brown Taylor has reminded us that in the Deuteronomy 5 version of the Ten Commandments (the most commonly used is Exodus 20), the one dealing with the Sabbath is by far the longest, consuming fully one third of that text. She also points out that the creation of the Sabbath day on the seventh day of the creation epic (Genesis 1), is the only one of God's creative acts that is called "holy." The rest, from the first gift of light to the making of humankind are simply called "good." She writes:

Sabbath was a mandated gift, a gift we were commanded to enjoy. We don't like this. We like to control our own time.... Jesus said, "The Sabbath is made for us and not for God." Did he mean for us to turn the Sabbath into just an ordinary day? Or did he mean for us to turn all our ordinary days into Sabbaths?

I think the latter. Compassion, obligation, duty—things that the Christian life often laid upon us as imperatives, to be directed toward others, also need directing home, to ourselves. We are, you recall, called to love God, our neighbor, and our best selves with all our heart, soul, and mind. We need a time to recharge, "far from the madding crowd," to borrow from Thomas Hardy. We need such time because life needs balance, needs *vacate*—Latin meaning "to give space to," for silence, rest and renewal.

Music, speech, even the pattern of daily life becomes an unintelligible dirge and drudgery if there are no pauses between phrases, between notes, or in sleep that separate the days. It is the pauses that bring meaning to what surrounds them. "Come away with me," says Jesus, "and rest awhile."

When I was in college, five of us from the religion-philosophy department accompanied Dr. Bill Paulsell on a retreat to a Trappist monastery in Bardstown, Kentucky. We drove from eastern North Carolina for thirteen hours, arriving dead tired and numb from the ceaseless drone of tires and the sound of each other's voice fixed in our aching heads. Gethsemane Monastery, where Thomas Merton spent most of his monastic life, is nestled in the rolling bluegrass farmland of central Kentucky. It is a true spiritual oasis, a place of extraordinary peace and solitude. Trappist monks do not take a vow of silence, but rather exercise the discipline of silence. They might be working in a field for a whole day and not a word will pass between them except, perhaps, for a solitary "Pass the shovel, Harry." They break their silence principally for worship when they gather for each of seven services throughout the day the earliest at an ungodly 3:30 a.m.

After we arrived and found our "cells," small, sparsely furnished rooms, we were all eager to see the chapel. It was a beautiful building of simple, classic lines. It had the most extraordinary stillness, with not even a birdsong from outside to break the void. The quietness was so complete, so intense after that long, closeted drive, that I understood for the first time the feeling of sensory deprivation, and I had to leave the chapel and

walk down the stone hallway for some minutes. My point is that the ideal lies somewhere in between a synthesis of activity and silence, work and rest. “Come away and rest a while,” encouraged Jesus.

Our culture these last few years seems to have been marked by a pervasive angst. And oddly this has coincided with a quickening of pace, in communications and entertainment, for instance. T.V. and movies manipulate the sense of pace with rapid frenetic editing. The news comes to us in quickly edible sound bites. Text messaging allows for rapid-fire communication—happily, I haven’t succumbed to its temptation, and have no desire to. People talk on cell phones in public places as if communicating with the hearing impaired. Blackberries, Wi-Fi, and instant messaging make bite chunks out of down time. If ever there was a need to calm the harried soul, it is now.

So . . . I want to encourage us to *make* time. To feed the self more consistently, to heighten the receptive senses to things seldom lingered over. What, for instance, does just one french fry taste like? Just one; not a handful wedged between Coke and a chicken sandwich. Just one—savored, tasted, lingered over on the palate. It’s delightful.

This reminds me of nights as a young boy when my parents would come home from the pub with friends, having picked up some fish and chips on the way for a late night snack. The aroma of them would drift up to my bedroom and make me salivate like Pavlov’s dog. So I’d engineer a cough, or inadvertently drop a heavy book on the floor, or paddle a little heavily along to the bathroom. Anything to draw attention. And if I got lucky, as I often did, my dear old Mum would stick her head around the bedroom door in the darkness, and sneak in that most succulent of English delights in the mouth of a child, a “chip butty.” A sandwich of white, buttered bread—never margarine for so eminent a feast—chips (*please*, not “french fries”), salt and peppered, and with a liberal dose of barley malt vinegar, the fragrance rising from the steaming sandwich like a holy incense in the dark. I would chew every bite with monastic discipline, a dozen, two dozen times, savoring it as though it was the last meal of a condemned man.

We do ourselves a disservice when we don’t take time to savor life’s simpler pleasures. So let me encourage you with a few suggestions.

- Take time to linger over the creative innocence of children at play.
- Read a parable a day, a mere fourth of a page. Don’t read it as you would a novel, but as you might nestle to a pillow at the edge of day. Take time to let your imagination stir within the text. Bring the life and times of the event to the mind’s eye. Role play each of the characters in succession. What emotions does it evoke.
- Listen to your favorite music, not as background, but listen as to an old friend newly discovered, the sort of listening that speaks of intimate friendship.
- Have a conversation with a friend that focuses on listening, searching for the soul of the other.
- Watch a ball game with all its subtle nuances of communication artfulness, the players slyly shifting balance, the twitching semaphore from the dugout and third base.
- Savor food that’s not rushed down. (I think I understand why the French eat smaller portions that we do.)
- Take time to pray in a dialogue with God, not conscious of the form and language, as often constrains us, but letting the prayer rise with inmost feelings like an untethered balloon. Words themselves so often bind us. Choose a plant, and with the sort of scrutiny we might give to a sudden sound, watch its living progress day by day.
- Listen to the sounds of nature doing its independent thing. A festival of sound that has changed little in a million years.
- Sing a favorite hymn. let the mind meander through its phrases.
- Say “Thank you” a lot, to God and others, especially for the things we take for granted.

“Come away and rest a while,” said Jesus.

Let me close with this extract from a poem by one of my favorite Christian poets, the early seventeenth-century cleric, George Herbert. It’s called “The Pulley.”

When God first made man,  
having a glass of blessings standing by,

“Let us,” said he,  
“Pour on him all we can.  
Let the world’s riches,  
Which dispersed lie,  
Contract into a span.”

So strength first made a way;  
Then beauty flowed, then  
Wisdom, honor, pleasure.  
When almost all was out  
God made a stay,  
Perceiving that,  
Alone of all his treasure  
*Rest* in the bottom lay.

Amen.