

Healing Rest
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56
Sunday, July 21, 2024

Let us pray: Quiet our minds, still our spirits, that we might hear and receive your Word and be nourished by it, in Christ. Amen.

Two weeks ago, we read about Jesus sending his disciples out into the surrounding villages to preach and teach and heal people the way that he had been doing. So they go out, and it says, “They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” This week, they come back, and they’re telling Jesus about everything they had done and taught, everything that had happened. Imagine how *excited* they were. Jesus had sent them out to do things they had never done before – probably never *dreamed* of doing before – and they actually *did it*. They did the things that they had seen Jesus doing.

So they come back, and they’re telling him all about it, and Jesus says, “Okay, we’ve got to seize on this momentum and keep going! We’ve got a head full of steam now, and we’ve got to build on this!” No, he doesn’t. He says, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Because the word had spread, and there were so many people coming to them that they couldn’t even take a break to eat. So Jesus says, “Let’s go where *no one* is and take a break. Just you and me.”

I read an article recently titled, “Lie down, sit still, take a break: Your brain needs a rest,” and I want to read some of it to you:

Downtime is a necessary part of life. Science shows it helps us to be healthier, more focused, more productive, and more creative. Yet, somehow, we often lose sight of this.

Many of us feel as though we're wasting time if we aren't getting things done, but research points to the costs of always being "on" and the importance of giving our brains a break. Our brains aren't built to handle constant activity.

Even the briefest moments of idle time, or pauses, are important. Short pauses — whether you take a few breaths before entering a room or go for a ten-minute walk — can lead to necessary self-reflection.

We feel that we need to be getting on with things. But if we're always getting on with things, we haven't taken any time to decide or examine whether what we're getting on with is the most interesting, important, fruitful, delightful, pleasurable, or healthy thing.

Research has shown that low-level daily stress (so not even high levels of stress, but low levels of stress that are consistent) can create such intense wear and tear on our body's physiological systems that we see accelerated aging in our cells. "Mindfulness-based interventions can slow biological aging by interrupting chronic stress, giving us freedom to deal with difficult situations without the wear and tear — and giving our bodies a break."

Research has shown the many benefits of resting, even briefly, for brain health. In 2021, when many Americans were working remotely all the time, Microsoft conducted a study that followed two groups of people: the first had back-to-back Zoom meetings, and the other group took 10-minute meditation breaks between meetings. (They studied their brains.)

In the group that had back-to-back meetings, their brains were filled with cortisol and adrenaline. They were tired, stressed, more irritable, and less compassionate. (We're going to come back to that.) But in the other group, their brains were more relaxed, but also more engaged.

(It goes on to talk about the difference between *intentional downtime* and *boredom*, saying that it's tempting to pick up our phones and scroll, thinking of that as downtime. But, they say, that does not actually engage our minds the way they *need* to be engaged, and it actually has an *adverse* impact on our brains and our bodies.)

It says that we fill all of our waking hours with busy-ness, doing, and self-distraction. We are so focused on *doing* that we don't have any time for *being*, unless we seize the opportunity on purpose.

Most Americans think of downtime as something that is extra or indulgent — a treat that has to be earned only after we've done all of our productive tasks. But research suggests the opposite: Downtime is a basic human need.

And so what we need to do, they say, is start emphasizing that downtime is a normal, expected, appreciated part of what it means to be alive, what it means to be well, what it means to be whole, and what it means to be thriving.¹

Right after I wrote that part of the sermon, I got up from my desk, walked out of our home office, and found one of our cats sprawled out in the sunshine on the living room floor. So I laid

¹ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/other/ar-BB1p6RIr>

down in the sun with him, petting him and listening to him purr for a few minutes. When I went back into the office, I said, “You know what, I’m going to do a morning devotion before I get back to work.” So I opened the book *Jesus Calling*, and I kid you not, this is exactly what it said:

Come away with me for a while. The world, with its nonstop demands, can be put on hold. Most people put *me* on hold, rationalizing that someday they will find time to focus on me. But the longer people push me into the background of their lives, the harder it is for them to find me.

You live among people who glorify busyness; they have made time a tyrant that controls their lives. Even those who know me as Savior tend to march to the tempo of the world. They have bought into the illusion that more is always better: more meetings, more programs, more activity.

I have called you to follow me on a solitary path, making time alone with me your highest priority and deepest joy. It is a pathway largely unappreciated and often despised. However, you have chosen the better thing, which will never be taken away from you. Moreover, as you walk close to me, I can bless others through you.²

So Jesus was on to something here. The disciples have been out working hard, so now they need a break to reconnect with him and to remember that life is not just about *doing*, it’s about *being*. This is built on the idea of *sabbath*. Sabbath comes from a Hebrew word that means *rest*. In six days God created the earth and everything that exists, and on the seventh day, God rested. And God’s *people* are commanded to do the same. *Commanded*. Not just, “Hey, I think this is a good idea, if you have time,” but, “You need to do this.” It is #4 on the top ten list of commandments.

After the people of Israel are set free from slavery in Egypt, God says to them in Exodus, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

² https://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Calling-Enjoying-Peace-Presence/dp/1591451884?ref_=ast_sto_dp

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

And then the command is restated a little differently in the book of Deuteronomy, “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

So in Exodus, the rationale for sabbath was that if *God* can stop working and just *be* for a day, and the universe doesn't fall apart, then it won't fall apart when *you* take a break, either. And in Deuteronomy, the rationale is that the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt and never got a day off, so the sabbath is meant to remind them that they are not slaves anymore. In all of this, sabbath rest is meant to remind us that we are not defined by what we *do*. Our worth is not based on what we *produce*. Our value and our worth come from the fact that we are *children* of God, created in the *image* of God, who have been *redeemed* by God and are *sustained* by God.

Pastor and author Rich Villodas writes that, “Sabbath is not a *reward* for hard work. It is a reminder that our work will remain incomplete. It is a day that moves us from *production* to *presence*. It reminds us that we are not God. And it points us to the deeper rest that we need in Christ.”

Jesus doesn't even tell his disciples to take a full *day* here. Just to take a break and rest for a while. And then *after* that in our reading, we hear that they cross the lake and get out of the boat, and all of these people are waiting there for them, and Jesus begins healing them. What's interesting is that the lectionary skips verses 35–52 in this passage. What happens in between? Jesus calls them away to rest for a while, and then Jesus miraculously feeds 5,000 people. Then the disciples are out on the lake, and a storm pops up, and Jesus comes walking to them on the water and says, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." So when we step away and take time to rest, Jesus *feeds* us and *reassures* us before we get on with the work that he calls us to. Whether it is a *whole* day, *part* of a day, or a *moment* in the day, sabbath is about stepping out of the normal rhythms and routine of life to reconnect with God and be renewed.

Now, you remember in that article I read you where it said that the group that went from one Zoom meeting right into the next were tired, stressed, more irritable, and less compassionate than the group that took a break? Well, it says here that when Jesus and the disciples went away in a boat by themselves for a while, they got to the other side of the lake and saw all these people waiting for them.

Imagine that you have been working really hard doing whatever (your job, yard work, housework, cooking), and you finally sit down to take a break, and someone comes into the room or calls you and is like, "Hey, can you come help me do this?" (Those of you who are mothers have no idea what I'm talking about.) When that happens, it is really easy to get frustrated and crabby. "I *just* sat down to take a break. Can't you give me a minute?" That's essentially what happens to Jesus and the disciples here. They go off to take a break, and as soon as they get to the other side, people are like, "Hey, can you help us?" Except Jesus, it says, has *compassion* for them and begins to teach them and heal them.

When we get stressed, tired, overwhelmed, or anxious, it becomes much harder to be compassionate. We more easily get frustrated and short with people. Jesus was *always* going away by himself. This wasn't the only time. The gospels tell us about all these times when he went away to pray and reconnect with God and be renewed. And that allowed him to be more compassionate; to love *others* because he is consistently being renewed and replenished by God's love.

When *we* take time to reconnect with God and be renewed and replenished by God's love, *we* are better able to love *others*. We *rest* so that we can have *compassion*. Because as this story shows us, *compassion* leads to *healing*. There is all kinds of pain in this world that could be healed by us just being more compassionate toward one another. More patient, more understanding, more loving. But we are all so stressed, tired, overwhelmed, and anxious that our ability to be compassionate is depleted. And we get the world that we see around us today.

Maybe the best way for us to be compassionate in this world is to take a break, put down the phone, get off the Internet, turn off the news, and go out for a ten-minute walk, or read a book, or pet a cat (or a dog), draw something, paint something, knit something, listen to music, *play* music, get your hands dirty in a garden, eat something that makes you happy, sit outside and listen to the birds, close your eyes, pray, or just take a nap. Whatever helps you reconnect with God and this world and yourself. Jesus calls us to come away with him and rest a while. Whatever that looks like for you, God can use it to rejuvenate and renew you, to make you more compassionate, to heal your soul. Because in healing *your* soul, God can bring healing to the world. Amen.