

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

This morning, I am going to seize upon the first three verses of our Gospel reading for this day. There is much dynamic activity just beyond these verses and the experiences of the disciples in the verses before speak also to this sense of a dynamic activity.

They have gone out, two by two, into the unknown – unknown villages, unknown receptions, unknown challenges and conundrums. They have been on public display and exposed. And they have been charged with healing and proclaiming repentance and anointing the sick and casting out forces called demons gripping the persons of individual whom they encountered.

And this, this dangerous and various journey, has taken energy, claimed focus and attention and sent them on wearying physical journeys from place to place. And now they gather around Jesus and tell him all that they have done, all that they have taught. And he sees the stress, the spent, drained faces of his followers. And he says something that we are often afraid to say to ourselves in any serious way-- ***Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.***

Here I offer a comment by Claudio Carvalhaes of Union Seminary in New York in response to this text. He writes:

But we can also fall into the trap of working hard for the cause of justice without attending to our souls and our spiritual and emotional needs. I think this latter group is the one Jesus is concerned with and talking to here -- those who do not stop to think, to meditate, to ponder, to wonder, to pay attention, to pray. To those, Jesus says: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Come away We are forever speaking of getting away. Of claiming quality time. But do we dare act on the idea in a consistent and effective manner? Sometimes I think we understand that the act of

moving away from all of the busy and engaging portions of our lives—entertainments and demands alike—exact a toll. It demands that we change.

To come away is really an invitation to let go. The disciples were filled with all sorts of experiences and excitements and they returned to Jesus in a setting that was so filled with busyness, crowded with people, needs and demands--people coming and going-- that the text tells us *that they had no leisure even to eat.*

It was time for them to let go, to let go of all of the activity and to find quietness. Time for them to let go. Thomas Merton once said, *The tighter you squeeze, the less you have.* And Socrates joins this moment to say *Sometimes you have to let go to see if there was anything worth holding onto.* Perhaps that is why the disciples had to go away, to fathom what had happened; to see if there was anything to hold on to even as they were willing to loosen their grip.

Come away...to a deserted place

To a deserted place It is not just any place that they seek, but a deserted place.

This past week I viewed one of the short films on our list for The Wild and Scenic Film Weekend in September. This three minute film was engaging and the language accompanying it especially so. The spoken word came from the writer Wallace Stegner and from a letter to Congress that he penned in 1960. I looked online for more and found this section of Stegner's long letter which made reference to a deserted place in his own experience growing up in Saskatchewan:

For all the usual recreational purposes, the alpine and the forest wildernesses are obviously the most important, both as genetic banks and as beauty spots. But for the spiritual renewal, the recognition of identity, the birth of awe, other kinds will serve every bit as well. Perhaps, because they are less friendly to life, more abstractly nonhuman, they will serve even better. On our Saskatchewan prairie, the nearest neighbor was four miles away, and at night we saw only two lights on all the dark rounding earth. The earth was full of animals--field mice, ground squirrels, weasels, ferrets, badgers, coyotes, burrowing owls, snakes. I knew them as my little brothers, as fellow creatures, and I have never been able to look upon animals in any other way since. The sky in that country came clear down to the ground on every side, and it was full of great weathers, and clouds, and winds, and hawks. I hope I learned something from looking a long way, from looking up, from being much alone. A prairie like that, one big enough to carry the eye clear to the sinking, rounding horizon, can be as lonely and grand and simple in its forms as the sea. It is as good a place as any for the wilderness experience to happen; the vanishing prairie is as worth preserving for the wilderness idea as the alpine forest.

A deserted place...

Professor Carvalhaes writes: *In the desert, we can have a sense of ourselves again. No noise besides our noise and the wind, no presence besides our presence and the ghosts, no company besides the plants and animals.*

In the desert, there is no peace if our heart has no peace. There is only fear in the desert if our hearts live in fear.

In the desert, we must control our minds not for the sake of controlling it but rather, to be able to free ourselves from the grips of anxiety, fear, and endless movement.

In the desert, we hear the words we speak, we hear the silence we produce, we attend to the movements of our body.

Strangely it is this deserted place that we need, and need to seek

And finally there is rest. Jesus' invitation includes rest:

Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves, and rest awhile.

And rest awhile...

A life without a lonely place, -- says Henri Nouwen--that is, without a quiet center, becomes destructive.

And St. John of the Cross reminds us: *In the inner stillness, where meditation leads, the Spirit anoints the soul and heals our deepest wounds.* He also says: *Silence is God's first language.*

What Jesus wants for his disciples following their big mission--and wants for us as well-- is not just rest, but Sabbath. His invitation is an invitation to find and to keep Sabbath. Is it possible that in the midst of rest we can also find Jesus? We may be concerned about the environment, we may be concerned about the future of this church, we may be concerned about any number of social causes, we may be concerned about members of our family--near or far--- but what about us? What about our spiritual core, our center, our life of prayer, our desert places, our ability to let go, our own life in the presence of Jesus?

In the midst of a very divisive time socially and politically, we need those quiet places of prayer and silence-- lonely places, deserted places, where the Spirit of the living Christ can come and break apart the cold chambers of our hearts and heal the broken places of our spirit.

Ephesians, our second lesson, reminds us this morning-- *But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* Perhaps in the silence of God's first language, we can hear the living Christ beckoning to us to let go and to find, in the lonely place once more, the healing presence of the Spirit which can liberate us, ease our burdens, correct our perspectives, build our hope, renew our faith, enliven our experience.

Can we go there? Can we pray in the lonely place to the living Christ?

And so this morning let us pray to the living God. Come Good Shepherd. Spread your table before us. Make us lie down in green pastures. Lead us beside still waters. Help us to find You yet again and again.

In the name of God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit-- Amen.