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2 Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2: 11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“A Higher Purpose”

A few years ago my oldest son Teddy and his wife Josie flew home from New York to spend part of their Christmas break with us. I distinctly remember my surprise when Teddy told me, soon after arriving, that he'd just finished the last week clocking in over 100 billable hours at the law firm he was working at, and he was eager to get some rest. Since then, he's moved on to an investment bank, where the hours are sometimes equally demanding, and each time we see each other, we seem to spend some part of our time together pondering the whole question of where rest will come from—where and when will balance of professional and personal life be achieved? How can we be made to feel whole when so many obligations and commitments press upon us daily? That question seems to be a core concern in our current time, isn't it?

Now, you remember that technology, at least in the early days of its coming on the scene, was touted as having miraculous time-saving properties, but as most of us have figured out, instead of giving us the rest we so eagerly sought, it simply sped up our lives, allowing us to produce more and more—sometimes at the very expense of rest. And I'm here reminded of those profound words from our hymnal, “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.” The ever-rolling stream of life, its daily drum-beat pressure, can be overwhelming at times: The pressure of raising a family. The pressure of putting kids through college. The pressure of fighting daily battles at work or school. The pressure of fitting in and producing what's expected of us. The pressure to stay healthy. The pressure caused by dysfunction in the culture and the body politic. The list goes on and on.

And these pressures aren't new, are they? In our reading from 2 Samuel this morning, we see in God's promise of rest to King David an underlying tension where his people have been hammered for years by enemies, so that when God devises a way to express his promise, his Covenant, to his people, he speaks about it as a “rest from all [their] enemies.” Part of this rest, this peace, was found in the delivery of God's chosen people to a promised land, flowing with milk and honey, and part lay in the promise to King David that his offspring would build a temple for God in the very center of Jerusalem. The rest was in the assurance that God would place himself in the midst of his people—that he would truly abide with them through thick and thin.

So it's no surprise that rest, as an assurance from God, is at the heart of Jesus' promise to his weary disciples in Mark's Gospel today. Notice that our Gospel text carves out Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 and his walk on the water, so that what we're left with is simply a narrative frame, the very words around a larger picture. And in this frame, I believe, is Jesus' core teaching about the character of Divine presence as a model for how we might consider living our lives.

The disciples have just returned from their first foray in ministry. They'd been successful but were exhausted by their work. So sensing their weariness, as well as his own—his dear cousin, John the Baptist, had just been murdered by Herod—Jesus urges his disciples to come away to a deserted place to rest. Now, I think Jesus genuinely wished for an opportunity to get away, to stop and be

renewed. But instead of renewal, Jesus and his disciples never experience the promised “deserted place of rest,” but rather are faced suddenly with hordes of people who’ve relentlessly followed them like bird-dog in a field of quail.

Now, what would you do if your plans for rest were unexpectedly upended? Well, the human thing would be to exit stage left, ignore the crowd, and find the rest you need. But Jesus does exactly the opposite of what we might expect: he has “compassion” for the people, and “he began to teach them many things,” the text tells us. The human response would be to withdraw, but the counterintuitive, Divine response is to wade into the lives of others—to not only feel but also act out of compassion.

Now, we all must be wondering if following Jesus is like what it must feel like to work for a New York law firm—no rest for the weary, plunge forward despite the cost. But I don’t think this is the central message here. Sometimes we just need to stop, don’t we? And even Jesus recognizes the need for rest, and with every good intention, he starts to take the disciples to a “deserted place” for just that.

But in the midst of the journey to this place of rest, a *higher purpose* becomes evident: the needs of others around Jesus take on new meaning. And why? Because he places compassion at the center of divine and, by extension, human purpose. It’s like refusing to breath: he can’t *not* respond to the needs of others. Compassion often trumps rest in the Divine economy, because compassion is at the core of who God is; it describes, as one commentator puts it, the “essence” of the creator God.¹

You know, in ancient times, compassion was not a word that was used often to describe the way the Divine interacted with humanity. More often than not, you’d hear such words as vengeful, wrathful, or even angry, to describe deities of old.² And equally, any compassion shown by ancient gods was typically felt only from afar, with no willingness to do something about the feeling—no willingness to actually enter into the suffering of others.

But this God is new. This God has an essential “moral nature,”³ as Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, puts it—meaning that this God is so involved in human lives that he’s willing to suffer on behalf of others; he’s willing to act on his compassion by putting his life on the line for others—which in the end is exactly what Jesus does for all mankind.⁴ So, Jesus is telling his disciples, by his own example, to not just feel but demonstrate compassion—to follow the *higher purpose* of God—so that they will begin to stir up, in faith, a higher purpose within themselves.

This past weekend, my wife Ruth and I traveled to New York to visit Teddy, Josie and her family, and while we were there, we visited West Point on the Hudson River. I couldn’t wait to see this place with all its history and its legacy of producing so many prominent leaders of our country. Before our tour of the campus, I spent some time in the visitor center, where I wandered through a museum designed to tell the story of West Point. And near the end of my time in the museum, I

¹ Douglas John Hall, “Theological Perspective in Mark: 6:30-34, 53-56,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Vol.3, gen. eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 260.

² Hall, 262.

³ Abraham Heschel in Hall, 262.

⁴ Hall, 262 and 264.

came into a room where white statues of West Point cadets aligned the walls, all apparently marching on my left and on my right, in the same direction, to a common destination, which was an open door at the back of the room. As I walked through this exhibit, the voices of past presidents and others could be heard, delivering their commencement addresses over the years to the cadets of West Point: Roosevelt, Reagan, Clinton, Bush, Sandra Day O'Connor, to name a few. They all had different styles of delivery, but they all were focused on West Point's motto of "Duty, Honor, and Country." I was deeply moved by the experience of this display. Why? Because each keynote commencement-speaker spoke eloquently about what it means to live according to a higher purpose—what it means to faithfully embrace God's call for compassion and care for others.

After my experience in the museum at West Point, I posted a couple of pictures of the place on Facebook—one of the beautiful chapel there and another of the breathtaking view of the Hudson River, taken from the edge of the parade ground on the main campus—and to my surprise, I had close to 30 "Likes" in less than an hour. One responder, an old friend from Atlanta, posted that his son had gone to West Point, and he offered this insight: "What an inspiration it was to see those young Americans dedicate themselves to a *higher purpose*," he said. "Being at West Point," he continued "brings home the recognition of how much we owe to the 1% that volunteer to protect this country." He went on to say, "we have many men and women in harm's way tonight because they believe in Duty, Honor, and Country." After reading his response, I could only think that these young people must live each day with a higher purpose in mind.

And you know, the heart of the matter hit me right between the eyes as I digested my friend's comments. We all need rest from time to time to stay healthy in the face of life's pressures. Jesus himself recognizes this, since all throughout Mark's Gospel, he keeps slipping away to pray and rest alone in the arms of God. But to sustain a life in the long run, to be fully what God intends for each of us—to be made whole—requires that we embrace, in faith, a higher purpose that has at its core a built-in dedication to compassion for others to the point of personal sacrifice.

This is the good news this morning, my friends: To live the full life that Jesus wishes for us all, our true spirit will be realized only when we follow the call of compassion and love for others. Compassion for others is at the heart of life in God *and* Country. Compassion is the lynchpin of a life of deep faith and personal meaning.

So the next time my son Teddy and I have a chance to sit down and have that talk about how to achieve balance in a hectic life, I think I'll talk to him about focusing his life with a higher purpose in mind, a life centered on compassion for others. Because in that, I believe, lies the promise of new life—and peace.

Thanks be to God.