

Holy Space
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Rev. Peter Foss

It is truly ironic! So many people were coming to hear him preach that Jesus directs his followers to come away with him so that they can be all by themselves. However, while they retreat by boat, those who want Christ's counsel and comfort walk by land to the deserted place. Seeing the great and needy crowd waiting for him on the shore, Jesus of course has compassion and begins to share with them his wisdom. Scripture certainly depicts the elusive nature of his deserted spot.

Though perhaps an irony with Jesus, it is the normal unfolding of events for most of us. While we know we should spend time away – in order to reflect on who we are and nurture our hearts and minds – we seldom find the time or the create the space to do so. Henri Nouwen writes that “Our first and foremost task is faithfully to care for the inward fire...so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers.” Certainly Jesus subscribed to this tenet. That's why he urges his disciples to get away for awhile. To rest themselves and prepare quietly for the challenge of faithful ministry to the “lost travelers.”

Obviously, Jesus expected the time apart to be meaningful. That away from others, people might closely encounter God and be influenced by God's guidance. To learn in the solitude what God desires. I am reminded of the quotation in Bruce Feiler's book Walking the Bible, which I referred to a couple of weeks ago. Feiler is following the journey of Moses through the desert. “As Moses tells the Israelites near the end of their journey: ‘Remember the long way that God has made you travel in the wilderness these past 40 years, that he might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts?.’...the appeal of the desert remains the same today. By its sheer demands – thirst, hunger, misery – it asks a simple question: ‘What is in your heart?’ Or to put it another way, ‘In what do you believe?’”

I think I mentioned last Sunday that while Linda and I were in Russia, we only slept in one room, that being the tiny cabin we had on the cruise ship. Every night from the day of our flight in until our departure, we always could look forward to the same space every night. There is great comfort in that! After busy and hectic days, to be able to retreat to a certain element of peace and quiet is essential. To know you will be undisturbed gives you a better chance of rest and renewal. On the trip, we were repeatedly advised to always be cautious of thieves and pickpockets. Although Linda and I had no problems, several of our group encountered Gypsies who tried to steal some of our possessions. You will get a kick out of this. One woman in our group, who we think was about 90, hit the gypsies over the head with her umbrella. They were a bit surprised at this tiny woman's spunk and retreated quickly.

Jesus advised his followers to retreat simply to seek seclusion apart from others, knowing that such time set aside is healthy. You cannot minister without such times for spiritual self-nourishment. The world is a threatening place. We need to have the deserted space that gives us security. Apart from the dangers of the world. So we can find the strength to endure when times are so scary. From the Gypsies around us. It is to find a quiet place to pray or reflect when we see too much violence and sadness on the television – the MidEast, Iraq, a child murdered on the mean streets of any city or town. We cannot always bop the offender over the head with an umbrella, it is helpful to have a place where to which we can retreat for solace.

So many people have warned us! We are too busy as a society; this in itself is scary. Nouwen writes, “There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying or doing. Jesus may have been seeking safety away from the crowds. Or he may simply have been seeking time apart, for the sake of his own well-being and health.

In verses from Mark that were not read this morning, Jesus bids the crowd goodbye and takes a boat to the other side of the sea. There he climbs up a mountain and prays. Finally he has found the holy space he so desperately needs. But not for long! Soon he crosses back over the sea, landing at Gennesaret. Again he is surrounded by those who recognize him and he begins to minister to the sick, bringing healing to all. The ascent up the mountain seems so inconsequential when you read Mark's gospel. It appears almost like a footnote. Yet, it is more a measure of the time that Jesus could find than a statement of how important it is to get away. Being away seems to impart strength to the Christ. There is greater energy and renewed compassion after Jesus takes time to pray and reflect. In fact, when he returns Jesus seems to be totally immersed in ministry, not weary as we might expect.

We too need to discover our sacred and holy places. Those destinations that can bring us comfort and reassurance. Those spots of oasis which can offer us an opportunity to renew – to recharge the batteries. Clearly, as we read Mark and the other gospel accounts, we see a Christ figure who is engaged with humanity. That is God's calling to each of us – to reach out in love and embrace, especially to those needing our care. Mark's Gospel describes the scene that is all too common for Jesus: "...and they laid the sick before him in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed." Obviously, the task is to minister in a world that desperately seeks love. In our marketplaces, I can see the poor and destitute, those with today's AIDS-like diseases, the Iraqis and the Lebanese and the Israelis (many of them children), the hungry, the victims of storm and hurricane and Tsunami – the list is endless and in and of itself can make us weary. And frightened.

Yes, we find relief in church together. Which is why we need our sacred and holy temples today more than ever. We need to reassure people, that when they enter through these doors, they will discover the rest and then the support they need to go on. We also need to find the time to separate ourselves from the struggles of our world. To draw our strength from quiet settings and holy spaces. How can we serve unless we are confident of who we are and what we are all about.

May God help us to find times apart. Not just for conversation or to pursue hobbies or even to exercise. Although such occasions and pursuits are necessary, they are not what I am speaking to this morning. May God help us to find the time for the deserted spaces that ultimately nurture our spirits so that we can continue. In church and by ourselves, may the time be available for us to ask the important questions: "What is in my heart?" and "What do I truly believe?" It is the answers to these questions that give us the courage to continue.