

Rest and Compassion: vital for healthy life

7 Pentecost/Proper 11B

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile”

To do and be our best, takes time. And it takes time to withdraw, recharge and gain some fresh perspective on life when we tend to be in a big hurry.

Excellence and rest are interrelated. One man challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man had a leisurely lunch and took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other fellow had chopped substantially more wood than he had. "I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did."

"But you didn't notice," said the winning woodsman, "that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest."

In this culture of hurry, Jesus invites us to come apart and rest a while. He knows that, in such a culture as ours, we find it difficult to wait.

Into our ever-accelerating, fast and fluid world, Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). According to Scripture, the first followers of Jesus are an awful lot like us - coming and going, with no chance even to sit back and grab a bite! So they escape by boat to a deserted place.

Jesus knows something that today's best thinkers are only beginning to understand: Decomposition takes time. The making of good, rich, life-giving compost, for example, takes time. "You can't hurry compost for the same reason you can't hurry love and you can't hurry a soufflé," explains James Gleick, author of *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (New York: Patheon Books, 1999). "The biochemistry has its own inherent pace." Likewise, grandchildren take time, learning a foreign language takes time, the testing of new drugs takes time, and vacations that truly enable us to rest, relax and recreate take time. You can't push a DOOR CLOSE button on an elevator and speed up any of these important activities.

You might as well try to teach cats to swim.

Resting a while is not simply a lifestyle option - it is critical for Christians living in a hyper speed, ramped-up world. We need to get back to the Old English meaning of "speed," which was success and prosperity, not velocity. After all, "Godspeed" doesn't mean "God hustle you along," it means "God grant you a successful and prosperous journey."

The demand for time is catching up to us. The need to take time out is becoming a passion. The good news is that some supercharged souls seem to be getting the message and slowing down a bit. Three-hour movies are becoming more common. A novel that is less than 800 pages long hardly seems worth the trouble these days. Young people inspire us to take time, like 23 year old Julia Butterfly Hill, who sat in a Pacific redwood tree for two years to keep it and the forest it grew in from becoming lawn furniture. Today, something that takes a long time is serious and precious.

Spiritual development is one of life's precious journeys. Discover the benefits of breaking out of the workaday world and devoting an hour, a day a week to reflection and relaxation. Amazingly, people can come up with all kind of reasons why a Sabbath rest of worship and prayer takes too much time. Proven benefits are numerous and range far beyond the spiritual. Bill Parent, a Roman Catholic priest and long-distance runner, reports that an almost universally recognized training principle is that a runner becomes faster by taking a day off from training each week. "The Sabbath principle," he observes, "is built into our physical bodies."

You may ask, "What about the connection between rest and compassion?" Jesus commanded the disciples to rest. They were running out of steam and were neglecting their own needs. The lack of compassion for human need is related to ceaseless activity. Activity makes us too busy to take notice. We would rather be numb with activity than be open to the need of others. One parishioner who wrote me this week wrote of a recent CNN poll that found that Americans were more concerned about the price of gas in their tanks than the effects of another war upon the people of the Middle East. Have you noticed the price of gas has not reduced traffic or our speed?

An ethics professor at Princeton Seminary asked for volunteers for an extra assignment. About half the class met him at the library to receive their assignments. The professor divided the students into three groups of five each. He gave the first group envelopes telling them to proceed immediately across campus to Stewart Hall. He told them that they had 15 minutes and if they didn't arrive on time, it would affect their grade. A minute or two later, he handed out envelopes to five others. They were also to go over to Stewart Hall, but they had 45 minutes. The third group had three hours to get to Stewart Hall. The students weren't aware of it, but the professor had arranged for three drama students to meet them along the way.

Close to the beginning of their walk, one of the drama students had his hands on his head and was moaning aloud as if in great pain. About half way to Stewart Hall, on the steps of the chapel, the seminary students passed a man who was lying face down as if unconscious. Finally, on the steps of Stewart Hall, the third drama student was acting out a seizure. In the first group of students, those who had only 15 minutes to get across campus, no one stopped to help. In the second group, two students stopped to help. In the last group, the one that had three hours for their assignment, all of the students stopped to help at least one person. The professor had clearly shown that time invested along our journey enhances ministry.

So this week I ask that you would examine your lives to:

- 1) take time to physically rest, eat better and recreate,
- 2) see where you can carve out time to spend with God alone,
- 3) carve out time to give back to God who holds all the time we have left. **AMEN**