

Sunday, July 21, 2024

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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A Spirituality of Rest

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

While it's certainly true that there are many ways in this world to experience desolation
And while no one really needs more desolation in their lives,
If you were interested in a very particular and embarrassingly keen sort of desolation
I'd invite you to look no further than doing a Google image search for the word "spirituality."
The waves of images

Self-consciously torn from their practical Eastern religious contexts
And cutely or bedazzlingly repackaged for consumption
All comprising an ocean of new-age-inflected self-care nebulousness:
It is really astoundingly dispiriting.

You come away with a visceral sense that: to most people
Christianity is a religion devoid of spirituality
While most every other faith is a spiritual practice devoid of religion.
That both of these statements are equally false and equally insulting
Is all part of the experience.

As desolating as this exercise is, though, it's not unilluminating.
In the popular imagination, Religion writ large is an external public intellectual activity,
Spirituality is an internal, individual, experiential practice.

And it says something about how the church has lived or failed to live the faith
That Christianity is the exemplar par excellence of this deficient notion of Religion.
There doesn't seem to be a sense that a faith actually is a practice
With public and private dimensions and expressions,
That a public expression of faith without a personal practice of faith,
Without cultivating the mystery, without deep personal consequence,
Without a personal openness to transformation:

Well there's no there there.

Similarly, an individual practice that has no external or public consequence, that does not lead To
some sort of positive action in the world is little more than self-soothing solipcism.

We see a lot of this solipcism in the unmooring of spirituality from faith
And the coopting of spirituality by a largely corporate wellness industry

That leverages things like meditation as ways to deal with or eliminate stress
All while leaving the structures that create, perpetuate or compound the stress
Conveniently unaddressed.
Spirituality becomes about coping with a difficult world
But it does little to change it, it's so person. But that's hardly a vibrant spirituality.
Religion and spirituality simply cannot be divorced from each other
Without both unravelling completely.

All of which is to say, one way or another: we've got some work to do.
Our faith is a practice that is aimed at opening us out
To a movement of divine grace that is meant not only to change, to transfigure us
Into the nearer likeness of God
But, through us, is meant to transform and transfigure the world.
We must be about the genuine practice of our faith.

One of the practices central to our faith, central to Christian spirituality
Is the object of our Gospel lesson today.
And it's not necessarily easy to see.
But it's incredibly important.
And our Gospeller uses the idea of rest to get us there.
Now: rest is one of those spiritual practices that is much misunderstood in our culture.
We misconstrue rest as something inert or inactive,
Because we think it has to do, principally, with the body doing nothing
So we tend to want to redeem rest in our productivity obsessed culture
By appropriating it as an aspect of our labor:
We rest so we have energy to do more stuff. We need to work at producing rest.
Rest is an aid to productivity, a means to end, never quite a good in itself.
This is not how Jesus understands rest.
Rest, for Jesus, is not about doing more stuff.
If faith, to paraphrase Fr James Alison.
Is to relax into the loving, healing, transformative regard of the one who really likes us
Who deeply loves us, whose love is the center of our being, then rest is a habit of faith.
And rest becomes critical when we are in danger of losing our connection to what matters
When we're at risk of forgetting who we truly are: beloved by God
Not because of anything we did or didn't do, not because we earned it or deserve it
But simply because: wonderfully, excessively, inexplicably, and graciously...that's who God is
And that's who we are to God.
This love is not an outside or forensic or external addition to us
But as the very root of our being. God loves us into being.
Rest is a practice that is meant to unpick our impulse to do everything all of the time,
Our impulse to rely principally if not solely on ourselves
Our impulse to want to earn, seize, or produce the love of God or to be God for ourselves
Rather than allow ourselves to be loved by God,
Giving ourselves up to God, and letting God do and be God in and through us in love.

Jesus wants to teach the disciples about rest.
And here we have to expand our vision of our reading to include at least a consciousness

Of the roughly twenty verses skipped in our lection,
As well as the more or less immediate context of our lesson.
Mark chapter 6 is about how we are so accommodated to the particular status quo
Of how the world works and our place in it
A status quo that is violently sicksick and death infected, the status quo that forms us
That something new in the midst of this status quo
Something unexpected, yet mysteriously familiar, that undoes it, dissolves it, is rejected.
Jesus comes to his hometown to heal and preach, he's rejected.
The image we're given of the world as we most intimately know it, the world's status quo
Is the venal and vicious Herod:
You'll remember from last week the story of the beheading of John the baptizer
And that grotesque fun house mirror image of the last supper
In Herod's feast at which John's unjust death is, as Fr. Moretz pointed out last a week
Little more than light entertainment, a cruel joke, suffering merely the occasion for mockery.
In the midst of this sort of world, you'll remember from a couple weeks ago,
Jesus empowers his disciples to serve as countersigns: signs of healing, of wholeness,
Hope and renewal. They're given power to cast out impure spirits.
And the disciples return to Jesus, in our reading today, with a proud report of all they've done.
And Jesus says: Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest awhile.
Only: they're cut off at the pass. The place they want to go and rest, is filled with people
Needy people. People like us. Who need Jesus.
And unlike Herod, an unjust shepherd of the Jeremian prophetic model if ever there was one,
Jesus, the good shepherd, the true shepherd, has compassion. And he teaches. And he heals.
Doubtless, he's as bone tired as the apostles, but he's not forgotten that life of love alive in him.
The life of love he's meant to reveal. The life of love that is his life. He has not forgotten who
And whose he is.
And he's able to rest in that love even as he pours it out from its inexhaustible source
In his own heart of love.
Imagine the disciples' disappointment, indignation, resentment!
But Jesus doesn't resent the crowds for their need
He looks on them, he looks on us, with deep and overwhelming compassion.
The inner life and outer life are one in Christ.

Jesus knows, though, that his disciples need rest. They're failing. Fast.
And this is what our lesson has excised this morning:
The disciples come to Jesus and say, in a wonderfully transparent act of projection:
Tell them all to go away. It's late. Tell them it's over. They're hungry. There are a lot of them.
Tell them to go away and eat something.
And Jesus says, "I'm sorry I'll not be doing that. Why don't you give them something to eat."
And the disciples panic. Anxiety, fear, animosity toward the crowd.
They were healing and casting out demons the other day,
But they've completely forgotten the source of that power today:
Now it's all scarcity, impossibility, desolation; and trust in God, faith in God,
Has flown entirely out the window.
The crowd is the enemy, it's us against them,
In a recapitulation of precisely the same sort of antagonism
That Paul tells us Jesus came to overcome by his death and rising,

By taking our violence, our antagonism, our sin, yours and mine
Our death on himself, and letting all of it be exhausted in his infinite life of love.
But Jesus knows what he's doing in fomenting this crisis with the disciples.
And he takes what they have, what little they have, and by his love: he makes it enough.
Enough to feed everybody.
Enough to serve as a Eucharistic countersign to Herod, to his feast,
And to the status quo world they represent.
We'll hear more about this next week, through John's particular lens.
But for us, today, Jesus shows himself to be the rest his disciples seek.
He shows them where the still waters truly are, he restores their souls.
They cannot do the work without him. They can try, but it'll only produce anxiety, animosity,
And a depth of spiritual exhaustion that is true desolation.
And Beloved: we're in the same boat.

We've talked a lot about rest, but we may have missed the practice
That informs, empowers rest, that makes of rest a transformative spiritual practice
That pitches us, in love, outside and beyond ourselves, towards others:
We must get into the habit of bringing all of ourselves to Jesus,
We need to practice returning to God, to remember who and whose we are.
The disciples excitedly, exuberantly brought their triumphs, and that movement is mirrored
By the crowds who brought their sickness, weakness, their humility.
We need to bring ourselves, our souls and bodies, our whole lives to Jesus. Everything.
Triumphs, joys, successes, yes: and sorrows, pain, anxiety, loss, bitterness, brokenness.
Ourselves. Our souls and bodies.
We need to abandon all of who and what we are to Jesus,
To lay it all at his feet, to touch the edge of his grace with our need
So we can receive from him all of who he is.
Because: we cannot do the good we desire to do without him.

The principal work that is set before us is not doing more stuff.
It's to heed Jesus' call: come and rest.
Here, he says, I have set a table for you even in the midst of adversity and trouble:
Come and rest.
Here, it is my life, given for you, give to you, that is your food and drink: come and rest.
Here, let my loving regard for you show you who you are, and help you to know:
You are your Beloved's, and your Beloved is yours: come and rest.
This is the heart of our practice, the prayer of faith that, in love, by grace
Turns and re-turns us to God to be the empty cup that is enough
To endlessly overflow with God's own love and life-giving presence.
Jesus is our rest.
Beloved, we must be about the genuine practice of our faith,
The rest in God, the remembrance of who and whose we are,
That is the ground of God's action in and through us.
We must be about the genuine practice of our faith:
For our own sake, and for the sake of this world of death and desolation that is waiting for us, For all of
us, to overflow with God's rest.

We must be about the genuine practice of our faith.
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
