

Sermon

“Come Away to a Deserted Place”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 18, 2021

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Prayer For Illumination:

**You, Lord, are the one who keeps interrupting your plans
out of compassion for us. You see us for what we are, “sheep
without a shepherd.”**

You intend to find time away —

away from the crowds

away from the ceaseless neediness

away from the hungry, sick, and dying

away from the noise and haste of a world gone wild

**But in compassion you cannot leave us to suffer . . . so you
work your wonders among us:**

teaching wonders

feeding wonders

healing wonders

climactic wonders

**We gather this Lord’s Day in the trust that you are not done
working your wonders among us. So speak to us**

By word read and proclaimed

By the impulses of our truest hearts

**By the recognition of our responsibility for our
neighbors**

By the inconvenient demands of love

**Speak — and we will listen.
Command — and we will act
Call — and we will follow**

**In the name of our servant Lord, who teaches us to serve.
Amen.**

Eph. 2:11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 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. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Mark 6:30 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. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to

teach them many things. 35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” 37 But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” 38 And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Mark 6:45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Mark 6:47 When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. 49 But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; 50 for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” 51 Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Mark 6:53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

- I. Usually the passage assigned for this Sunday generates a sermon about one of the miracles...**
 - A. Either the feeding of the 5000.**
 - B. Or the miracle of walking on water and stilling the storm.**
 - C. They both have much to teach us . . . But**
 - D. I am intrigued that this story about Jesus and his ministry is permeated with the idea that he (and his disciples) should “come away to a deserted place.”**
 - 1.**

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2.

35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.”

3.

Mark 6:45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

- 4. And most of the time . . . these plans are foiled by the need to show compassion to others...**
 - † #1 people followed by land and beat them to beachhead...**

33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore,

he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

† **#2 people are hungry in wilderness**

37 But he answered [the disciples], “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?”

† **#3 Once again as soon as they land....**

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II. The tidal ebb and flow of engagement in acts of compassion and being alone with God.

- A. There is a healthy and lively tension between taking time to renew our relationship with God, and feeling called to enact our love of God in ministries of compassion to a hurting world.**
 - 1. A sole-focus on time alone with God can lead to a selfish and self-centered kind of faith...**
 - 2. Too much focus on doing rather than becoming authentic children of God and disciples of Christ inevitably leads to frustration and despair.**
- B. It is the daily-lived tension between these two impulses which leads to a lively, God-centered, and compassionate faith.**
 - 1. *Some* of us will be good at making time for prayer and being with God and God-alone.
† *We need* to be wondering what gifts are**

given to us in our time with God which need to be shared in order that God might be glorified and those in need might be helped.

- 2. *Some of us will be very active and involved in our faith — a blur of constant motion serving others at home, at church, and in the world.***

† ***We need to slow down often enough to remember that it doesn't all depend on us and that (as the Psalmist 127 wisely teaches):***

- 1 *Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.*
- 2 *It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.*

III. We might ask, why “to a deserted place.”?

- A. Perhaps we have the answer in the story of Jesus' own discipleship.**

Mark 1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Mark 1:12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;

- B. And what were the temptations?**

1. **All were the temptation to trade his identity as a beloved child of God for some other way of defining his meaning and value:**
 - † To prove his relevance - stones to bread
 - † To be spectacular - leap from the temple
 - † To be powerful - all these nations I will give you
- C. **The deserted place — the wilderness is where we resist the urge to be defined**
 1. by our work, or
 2. our privilege, or
 3. our fame, or
 4. our money.
- D. **It is where we learn to gladly be defined by God's love for us and nothing else.**
- E. **God often shows God's power most spectacularly when we dare to venture out to a deserted place.**
 1. **In today's passage:**
 - † In the wilderness
 - † Out at sea

IV. In my work as Director of the Institute of Church Renewal I have been thinking about the church of the 21rst century.

- A. **What will be required of congregations to thrive in the bewildering situation we find ourselves in?**
 1. **With political polarization and cultural insensitivity on the rise**

- 2. With an ever growing gap between the economic realities of the haves and the have nots**
 - 3. With a world-wide pandemic which makes the kind of fellowship which have been the mainstay of church-life for centuries hard to maintain**
 - 4. With a growing sense of concern about the way we have abused creation and will be enduring more and more intense natural disasters**
- B. How will the church find its way in these perilous times?**
- 1. Surely part of the answer is that we must learn to hear God's call and respond.**
 - 2. God is often heard best when we have come away to a deserted place.**

Belden Lane:

"Only at the periphery of our lives, where we and our understanding of God alike are undone, can we understand bewilderment as occasioning another way of knowing."

- V. I am not fearful about the future — God is not done with us yet!**
- A. But ours is a time when we must faithfully navigate the lively tension between responding in compassion to the needs of a hurting world, and making time to be with God and God alone**
- B. And make no mistake — to come away to a deserted place is no easy task. To be in solitude**

with nothing but ourselves and our love for God to guide us is difficult.

C. The author Henri Nouwen has described the task:

In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, to telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me -- naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken, nothing. It is this no-thing-ness that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something.

.... The struggle is real because the danger is real. It is the danger of living the whole of our life as one long defense against the reality of our condition, one restless effort to convince ourselves of our virtuousness. Yet Jesus "did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners" [Matthew 9:13].

The Way of the Heart — Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry
HarperOne, 1981, pp. 26-28

- D. I hope you will join me in the work of listening carefully for the call of God upon us.**
- E. There is much for us to discover as we make our way further into a century which will demand that churches be nimble and responsive.**

In 2010 I co-authored a book with my friend and mentor Ben Johnson. It was entitled *Time Away: A Guide to Personal Retreat*. It is a good resource for anyone wanting to explore what it might look like to “come away to a deserted place.”