

The Church of the Epiphany

Oak Park, CA

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Good morning everyone. It certainly is wonderful to see so many of you on this warm, sunny, summer, Sunday morning. Good ole summertime. That time when lots of us are off on vacations or at least planning all sorts of summer fun. Even my oldest granddaughter, who will turn fourteen in a few weeks, put a poster up on the wall in her bedroom recently. She titled it My Summer Bucket List. It included 28 things she wanted to do while on summer vacation. Some of which she has already managed to check off; go to the beach, watch the sunset, a slumber party, and of course, a vacation. It included a few other items I didn't quite understand like cliff jumping, blind makeup, and poker. I can't imagine who might have taught her to play poker.

Yes, but it is that time of year. I even got to take a vacation myself this year. And it was a sort of bucket list of my own. I flew to Boston and then got to take a ferry from Falmouth to Martha's Vineyard for a day. I also went to Squam Lake, in the lakes region of New Hampshire which is where the movie on Golden Pond was filmed. Visiting that has long since been on my bucket list. I was then delighted to make it to yet another dream destination of mine, which was the coast of Maine! Beautiful. So quaint and peaceful. And don't think I don't have plenty of pictures of all of this that I'll be happy to show you anytime, I just loved it and can't wait to go back.

Of course, then, like all good things, that too came to an end. And in what seemed like the blink of an eye it was time to fly back home. Now, I don't know if it's just me or what, but the drudgery of going through the airport experience which includes fighting the traffic, checking in, going through security, hoisting your luggage up above your head while five other people fight you for the same little storage space, can just slap the vacation right outta me before I can even get home. Like it never happened!!! Nevertheless, it really was one of the most wonderful journeys I've ever taken.

However, not all life journeys are as enjoyable as that one and they certainly don't all end as planned. Of course, I am referring to the experience we see both Jesus and his disciples encountering in today's Gospel reading. A couple of weeks ago, earlier in Mark's Gospel, we read that Jesus sent the disciples out on a journey without much notice and with no special equipment or preparation—and without him, their teacher and friend whom they clung to and relied upon. Jesus sent them out just as they were. Empowered them, and trusted them to live the Gospel, the Good News directly with the people, the people who needed it the most. The sick, the poor, those living in fear or in mental turmoil.

Meanwhile, Jesus himself, during this same time period, has lost his own cousin John the Baptiser. While being held prisoner by Herod, he fell victim the most vile and perverted power game imaginable that ended in his being beheaded- his head then being presented on a platter.

This is where our Gospel story begins today. We can only guess how Jesus must have felt after the tragic loss of John. His pain heightened even further as he realized in a much more profound way that his own life and that of his disciples is at risk now too.

But, here are the disciples exhausted but energized after their successful mission. They were tremendously eager and excited to share their stories and experiences with Jesus and each other.

So, what does Jesus do? He regroups. He sees the harried disciples pulled in all kinds of directions, with no time to even eat. And so, he calls them to come away with him to a deserted place, he wants to be with them. Not doing...just being! He cares about them, knows they are excited but drained, and Jesus with all his caring and compassion wants to take them and tuck ‘em in for a nap! Doesn’t that sound wonderful to us grownups? However, I think that at that moment, the poor disciples were probably feeling a bit like my three-year old grandson Owen, who somehow believes that being tired and needing to rest is the opposite of being happy. He can be bouncing off the walls with exhaustion but because he doesn’t want to miss anything, and should you ask him then if he is tired, he will say “No! I not tired, I happy!” Like Owen, I suspect that at first the disciples might have resisted the idea of rest and they too would have said, “No, no! I not tired, I Happy!” But Jesus knew that what they needed was to be tucked away in a restful place, face to face with him, in the presence of God. After all, you can’t get the world right, if you yourself aren’t right!

So, Jesus shepherds the little band of weary disciples into their boat and they head for a quiet place on the other side of the lake shore. I imagine the disciples had by then, already given in to the idea of resting and relaxing, but as is often the case, in their lives and in our own, the world intercedes. And that rest, that sweet Sabbath doesn’t happen. A large crowd of people had gathered and watched as they were leaving and by the time their boat arrives at the shore it is no longer a resting place. The crowd in haste, has made their way by land to Jesus’ intended get-away place where they are already waiting for him.

Now we see Jesus living out that tension, modeling for us, how we too must be prepared to live out the tension between needing to be nourished and centered, and being needed and called elsewhere to minister and serve.

I'm quite sure most busy modern folks today understand this built-in tension completely, especially those who aspire to follow Jesus. Being a Christian means that there are at least one thousand and one times that we must choose between giving life away for others, and the necessity of responsible self-care. What are we to do? There is no doubt that our faith requires us to do certain things, but goodness, we can easily become overwhelmed by how much we have to do. We feel like we need to be doing something all the time. We need to be productive; we want to accomplish so much. And in an effort to get it all done we practically wake up with a check list of to-do items in our hand and then go to bed at night anguishing over what is left undone. It is so easy for us to get stuck in the mindset that the more we accomplish, the happier and more successful we'll be.

And the truth be told, many of us would resist Jesus' invitation to rest too. We treat rest like it is an offensive four-letter word! We even lift up our busyness and our weariness before God as objects worthy of praise and reward. We get all puffed up with pride and then we rattle off to God all the important things we have been busy doing. It sort of goes like this...

"Oh, my word Jesus...., I have been so busy, I haven't even had time to eat! And I still don't know what I'm going to do about the neighborhood council meeting because it conflicts with Billy's baseball practice and Suzie's piano lessons all on the same day my boss expects me to work overtime. And of course, you know I've still got to create a plan for world peace, write the great American novel and donate a kidney all by noon tomorrow. See how important and valuable I am?"

And that's when I imagine Jesus saying to me, "Well, well! If it isn't my old friend Martha! Don't you remember what I told you a long time ago when you complained about your sister Mary leaving so much work for you to do while she instead sat quietly at my feet? Remember, she was content just being present to me, listening to what I was teaching her? I can tell you are busy and worried about many things, but I told you then that Mary had chosen what is better. It was true then and it is still true now, Martha."

O that Jesus. He is pretty smart.

And of course, I want to be perfectly clear here, I am talking about the archetypal energy the biblical Martha represents, and that archetype is certainly not gender specific. Let it be said that there are plenty of us "Marthas" in the world both male and female, just as there are many "Mary" archetypes as well. We have a lot to learn, don't we?

I cherish the scriptures that remind me to rest and the importance of simply being rather than doing. Especially the passages that tell me that even Jesus retreated. Jesus and the teachings he emphasized to the disciples, model for us the truth of the fact that our day-to-day feverish activity needs to be interspersed with time for prayer and rest. Jesus invites us again and again, over and over to find and cultivate a time and a place, sometimes a physical space but certainly always an inner space, for God to dwell within us. A time to be present and listen for that still quiet voice of the Holy One.

Yes, Jesus sent the disciples on a journey. And what was true for the disciples is true for us today as well. Our entire lives are made up of journeys. Different kinds of journeys, of course, some take us to far-away places while others are inward journeys. Pilgrimages to help us discover what the mystics called, our own interior castle. A pilgrimage with a holy purpose to the heart of things.

Goodness knows, there are all kinds of voices calling us. And author, preacher, and theologian Frederick Buechner tells us that our task is to figure out which is the voice of God rather than the voice of our society, or our superego, or self-interest.

Over the last few weeks, as you can well imagine, I have been doing some discerning, and I have been persuaded that a sacred voice is calling us on a journey. One we will take together, you and me. One with an infinite field of possibilities. A journey together to a place where sharing and listening—of letting go of self-referential concerns will help us to discover the depth of who we are as individuals, who we are as a congregation, and one that will help us find our collective purpose in the world and how our purpose as a community is related to the purposes of God.

One that will help us gradually build into our lives rhythms of rest and solitude which will help us balance out the busy chaotic rhythms that often threaten to seduce us into less mindful ways of living. If we are to faithfully minister to each other, to be a place of welcome, to courageously and confidently engage with the most pressing ailments of our time—fear, greed, loneliness, spiritual indifference, and so much more, then it is incumbent upon us to be cognizant of the invitation Christ is offering us. As Jesus calls to us saying, “Come away to a place all by yourselves and rest a little while with me,” may we say Yes! And may we go out in faith and return in joy. Amen