

Proper 13A sermon, 8-2-20. Service virtually during COVID-19 pandemic
Genesis 32:22-31*Psalm 17:1-7*Romans 9:1-5*Matthew 14:13-21
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This morning, I had the best intentions to follow the example of Jesus in our gospel lesson. Sort of like the man who prayed:

*Dear Lord,
So far I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped,
haven't lost my temper,
haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent...
But in a few minutes, God,
I'm going to get out of bed.
And from then on,
I'm going to need a lot more help.*

My intention this morning was to do what Jesus did: withdraw. My plan was to withdraw to Ocean Isle for a week of vacation, and I was going to lead the liturgy and preach my sermon from the beach. But Hurricane Isaias had different plans for me and a lot of other people along the east coast! The condo rental agency called Friday and told us there was a mandatory evacuation order for all North Carolina beaches. We might go later this week when the storm passes, and then I'll do my best do follow in Jesus' footsteps and withdraw!

The gospel lesson begins with these words, "*Now when Jesus heard this [referring to the news of the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place...*"

In all four of the gospels, we are told time and time again, usually with only a few words, in what may seem to be a passing reference, that sometimes Jesus withdraws. He retreats to a quiet place, a deserted place, a solitary place, or up a mountain, or into a garden, down into the hull of a boat, into a wilderness, into a house where he did not want anyone to know he had gone. Often he rises early in the morning and slips away before others are awake.

I wonder if he sometimes left a Post-it note on the table, letting others know where he was going or when he planned to return? In today's gospel, Jesus intentionally "*withdrew... in a boat to a deserted place.*" We're told that almost every time he does this, he withdraws to pray.

Maybe Jesus was practicing the art of disappearing, like Naomi Shihab Nye, the poet who wrote these words:

*When they say Don't I know you?
say no.*

*When they invite you to the party
remember what parties are like
before answering.
Someone telling you in a loud voice
they once wrote a poem.
Greasy sausage balls on a paper plate.*

Then reply.

*If they say We should get together
say why?*

*It's not that you don't love them anymore.
You're trying to remember something
too important to forget.
Trees. The monastery bell at twilight.
Tell them you have a new project.
It will never be finished.*

*When someone recognizes you in a grocery store
nod briefly and become a cabbage.
When someone you haven't seen in ten years
appears at the door,
don't start singing him all your new songs.
You will never catch up.*

*Walk around feeling like a leaf.
Know you could tumble any second.
Then decide what to do with your time.*

Jesus, human just like all of us, recognized a holy need to nurture his inner life. Evidently he realized that he couldn't go it alone. He needed to connect to God and make it a priority to spend time listening to God, speaking to God, being still in God's presence. He needed time for rest and a reinvigoration of his body, mind and spirit. He needed to be with his Heavenly Father.

The wonderful human being, writer and teacher, Maya Angelou wrote about attending to this need in herself in a reflection she wrote entitled "A Day Away."

We often think that our affairs, great or small, must be tended continuously and in detail, or our world will disintegrate, and we will lose our places in the universe. That is not true, or if it is true, then our situations were so temporary that they would have collapsed anyway.

Once a year or so I give myself a day away.

On the eve of my absence, I begin to unwrap the bonds of which hold me in harness. I inform housemates, my family and close friends that I will not be reachable for twenty-four hours; then I disengage the telephone. I turn the radio dial to an all-music station, preferably one which plays the soothing golden oldies. I sit for at least an hour in a very hot tub; then I lay out my clothes in preparation for my morning escape, and knowing that nothing will disturb me, I sleep the sleep of the just.

On the morning, I wake naturally, for I have set no clock, nor informed my body timepiece when it should alarm. I dress in casual clothes and leave my house going no place.

If I live in a city, I wander streets, window-shop, or gaze at buildings. I enter and leave public parks, libraries, the lobbies of skyscrapers and movie houses. I stay in no place for very long.

On the getaway day I try for amnesia. I do not want to know my name, where I live, or how many dire responsibilities on my shoulders. I detest encountering even the closest friend, for then I am reminded who I am, and the circumstances of my life, which I want to forget for a while.

Every person needs to take one day away. A day in which one consciously separates the past from the future. Jobs, lovers, family, employers and friends can exist one day without any one of us, and if our egos permit us to confess, they could exist eternally in our absence.

Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us. We need hours of aimless wandering or spates of time sitting on park benches, observing the mysterious world of ants and the canopy of treetops.

If we step away for a time, we are not, as many may think and some will accuse, being irresponsible, but rather we are preparing ourselves to more ably perform our duties and discharge our obligations.

When I return home, I am always surprised to find some questions I sought to evade had been answered and some entanglements I had hoped to flee had become unraveled in my absence.

A day away acts as a spring tonic. It can dispel rain kor rancor, transform indecision, and renew the spirit.

I believe that it's not a coincidence that some of Jesus' most memorable miracles happened after he intentionally slipped away for rest and solitary time with God. In today's lesson, the disciples come and find Jesus while he is hiding out on the boat, and they tell him that an enormous crowd of people have followed him, and that they are hungry for healing and food. Jesus responds to them with these words: "...you give them something to eat."

Many scholars argue that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand wasn't that Jesus actually took the boy's two fish and five loaves and multiplied it into food enough for five thousand or more people — I believe he could have done this if he had chosen to — but that Jesus' faith in God's power and abundance unleashed the people from their own fear so that they opened their satchels and donkey packs and shared with one another the food and resources they already possessed. When this happened there was more than enough food to go around for everyone, even five to ten thousand people.

May each of us know that God alone is our bread, our strength, our hope. . . and may we know it so completely that we do whatever we must do in order to feast on God, to feast in God, to feast with God, and to share God's feast with all who hunger. Amen.