

## Sabbath Keeping & Compassion

I would like to address two themes from this morning's reading.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to do something. What he says is: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." In other words, he tells them to take a break to devote some time for being rather than doing.

In 1991, before the advent of the Internet, Joseph Epstein had this to say: "Hell, I assume, will be full of newspapers, with a fresh edition every 30 seconds, so that no one will ever feel caught up." Which makes me wonder "Who needs Hell?" Today we have CNN and Fox News.

Often he tells us the same thing as he told the Apostles - to take a break and devote some of our time to relax rather than to do. Yet often we ignore this command. We want to follow Jesus and are willing to take action, but when it comes to rest, we respond by feeling guilty when we take a break. We would do something big and brave, but rest is too simple, and so we ignore what Jesus tells us.

Many of us do critically important work and find ourselves exhausted. Yet we don't rest. We may even believe that we can't or shouldn't rest. We push ourselves in a way that we would never push others. Our life may be productive, we may check off everything from our daily "to do" list, but deep down we recognize something's wrong, that we lack a sense of deep meaning, and so we feel cheated.

Jesus invites us to rest, yet we treat rest as one of the four-letter words kind of like snow. If people are resting, we may be suspicious of them. If we're resting, we may be apprehensive of ourselves. There's always more to do, further ways to justify our existence by what we produce. In the face of this, Jesus smiles and says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while."

Blasé Pascal the 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher developed a theory of "distraction" in which he stated "We look for rest, and overcome obstacles to obtain it. But if we overcome these obstacles, rest becomes intolerable, for we begin at once to think either of the misfortunes that are ours or of those that threaten to descend upon us."

However, I believe that gradually we can build into our lives rhythms of rest and solitude to balance out the busy tempos that already beat so strongly. It can be done. Let me mention a couple of resources. One is a little book by Donna Schaper called "Sabbath Keeping." She helps us see that the Sabbath is not something to keep, but a way of living that helps us become people who work when it's appropriate, rest when it's appropriate, and even rest and work at the same time. She sees Sabbath as a road to living a life of plenty. I would recommend this book very highly and it only takes a couple of hours to read.

Another resource are the numerous retreat facilities open to us throughout the country. Some of these are associated with Episcopal and Roman Catholic religious communities. Both individual and group retreats are available. An individual retreat may involve working with a spiritual director or guide. Retreats can be scheduled for one or two days or longer periods. Two that come to mind are Sacred Heart Abbey in Berryville and Richmond Hill in Richmond. For more information on retreats, speak to any of the clergy connected with the parish. And if you go on retreat and find yourself sleeping a great deal, that may be exactly what God wants you to do!

The second area I would like to address is where the text says: "Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."

They needed someone to care for them with all the frustrations, the hurts and the troubles in their lives. What does compassion mean? The dictionary says: sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. And the dictionary also says to see the word mercy, which means compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

Jesus is like the man on the horse in the following story: There's a story told about a bitter, cold evening in northern Virginia many years ago. An old man sat by a river, waiting for a ride across. His beard was glazed by winter's frost and the wait seemed endless. His body became numb and stiff from the frigid north wind.

He heard the faint, steady rhythm of approaching hooves galloping along the frozen path. Anxiously, he watched as several horsemen rounded the bend. He let the first one pass by without an effort to get his attention. Then another passed by, and another. Finally, the last rider neared the spot where the old man sat like a snow statue. As this one drew near, the old man caught the rider's eye and said, "Sir, would you mind giving an old man a ride to the other side? There doesn't appear to be a passageway by foot."

Reining his horse, the rider replied, "Sure thing. Hop aboard." Seeing the old man was unable to lift his half-frozen body from the ground, the horseman dismounted and helped the old man onto the horse. The horseman took the old man not just across the river, but to his destination, which was just a few miles away.

As they neared the tiny but cozy cottage, the horseman's curiosity caused him to inquire, "Sir, I notice that you let several other riders pass by without making an effort to secure a ride. Then I came up and you immediately asked me for a ride. I'm curious why, on such a bitter winter night; you would wait and ask the last rider. What if I had refused and left you there?"

The old man lowered himself slowly down from the horse, looked the rider straight in the eyes, and replied, "I've been around these here parts for some time. I reckon I know people pretty good." The old-timer continued, "I looked into the eyes of the other riders and immediately saw there was no concern for my situation. It would have been useless even to ask them for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, kindness and compassion were evident. I knew, then and there, that your gentle spirit would welcome the opportunity to give me assistance in my time of need."

Those heartwarming comments touched the horseman deeply. "I'm most grateful for what you have said," he told the old man. "May I never get too busy in my own affairs that I fail to respond to the needs of others with kindness and compassion." With that, Thomas Jefferson turned his horse around and made his way back to the White House.

When the people looked into Jesus' eyes they saw the same thing. When he looked into the eyes of Thomas Jefferson he saw kindness and compassion. When we look to Him, we see the same kind of thing, compassion and kindness.

In the movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told* we see the young man Jesus standing in the shadow of a doorway in a town in Palestine observing the misery of mankind such as could be found on any street, in any town in that part of the world, in that day or in ours: the lame, the sick, the mentally deranged, the mean, the cruel, all

the inhumanity of the world.

As he was growing up, Jesus saw the human condition all around him he saw sickness, death, poverty, and he saw broken relationship. So when the crowds followed him, he did not send them away but he had compassion on them. He saw their brokenness and he extended the compassion of God's Son to them.

And that brings us to the question, if Christ had compassion on the crowds, what are we to do?

Luther says in his commentary to Galatians "To love means to bear another's burdens. Christians must have strong shoulders to bear the burdens of their fellow Christians. "

We must have strong shoulders to bear another burden. We need to have compassion like Christ. Luther says we are to be like "little Christ's" in the world.

In this closing story we see that kind of compassion in our world.

The NY Times had a story about a little boy who was riding the bus. He sat so close to a woman dressed in a gray suit that everybody assumed he was her son and she his mother, until finally another lady sat down on the seat in front of them.

When the little boy put his feet up on the seat & got the other lady's dress dirty, she turned to the woman in the gray suit and said, "Would you please tell your son to put his feet down because he's getting my dress dirty?"

The lady in the gray suit pushed the boy away and said, "He's not my son. I've never seen him before in my life." The second lady looked at the little boy sadly for a moment and then started talking with him. She asked him if he was traveling alone.

"Yes," he said, "I always travel alone. My mommy and daddy are both dead and I live with Aunt Clara. But Aunt Clara thinks that Aunt Mildred ought to take her turn in taking care of me too. So whenever she gets tired of me, she sends me to Aunt Mildred. I'm going to Aunt Mildred's now." The woman said, "It must be tough traveling alone." "Yeah," said the little boy, "it is. But I never get lost.

But," he said, "Sometimes I do get very lonesome. So whenever I see someone with a kind face I sit close to them, and pretend that I belong to them and that they belong to me."

The woman reached over and grabbed the boy, hugged him so tight that it almost hurt and wished for a moment that this little boy who wanted so much to belong could belong to her.

"He saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them." Amen