

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Proper 11, The Season After Pentecost, Year B
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Most of you know that the Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. It moves swiftly, but definitively through the life of Jesus. It leaves many questions unanswered, and even more lines of thought unexplored and today's Gospel lesson is no exception.

Jesus sent the disciples out to heal and teach. But where? For how long? What were the specific results? Unanswered questions.

Suddenly, the disciples return and report "all they had done and taught." it would appear they had been quite busy.

Jesus had been busy, too, for the crowds have grown to the point they press in on him and there is scarcely time for he and the disciples to eat. Without question, it's time for a break!

Jesus did not send the disciples out just so they could help in his work. I suspect it was more a training mission than anything else.

And now they return, and Jesus is sensitive to their need for rest and relaxation from the pressures under which they have been working. But, he does not send them away by themselves. They all needed a break---Jesus included.

Having recently returned from two weeks of general convention, doing what I hope was the Lord's work, I can appreciate the needs of disciples for rest.

All of us need periods of retreat and reflection. It is what I mentioned specifically in the last lamplighter. It is the principle underlying the Old Testament Sabbath and our own Observance of the Lord's day. We all need a time and place to get away, if only for a short time. I reflection.

Perhaps, you have had the experience of being used by God for some special mission -- a Cursillo weekend, a mission trip, or a Faith Alive team. While it may provide an emotional high--a mountain-top spiritual experience---there is an overwhelming need for rest afterward. It was to this need that Jesus was responding with his invitation to "come away to a deserted place All by yourselves and rest awhile."

Jesus and the disciples did get away by themselves for the short boat trip. But the people foiled their attempt to be alone in whatever quiet place to which they were headed. The crowds were waiting for them when their boat arrived. I can imagine Jesus was torn between the needs of the people and his own needs and those of his disciples.

His response is an example for us. He simply could not resist ministering to the people.

We human beings seldom have a very good sense of our own needs. That crowd probably followed the boat along the shoreline in order to see more astonishing things happen. And, they were not denied. Late in the evening Jesus fed all five thousand of them from a few pieces of bread and a couple of fish.

Their greater need, however, was for instruction, so he attended to that first, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." He took a whole day to "teach them many things."

There is a saying that "knowledge is power." Christians proclaim a greater truth, "knowledge is life--eternal life." not the knowledge of memorization or cramming of facts into our heads. Rather, the knowledge which comes from being in Jesus' presence and learning from him.

That kind of learning takes no great intellect. The most ordinary minds, thank God, can have that kind of knowledge. Through Jesus and his teaching presence, we are joined in life to God and become most profoundly learned and alive.

Jesus had compassion on his disciples, and he bids them to come away for rest. He had compassion on the crowd, and he fed them both knowledge and bread and fish.

One writer suggests that today's Gospel describes an abortive vacation on the part of Jesus' disciples. Not a vacation, really, just a rest. It's not a bad lesson for us.

Compassion has no schedule. Vacation or not, people bring their needs to us in countless ways. Some thirst for conversation so much that they grasp at it with grateful intensity. Others need physical help--lifting, lugging, moving, cleaning. Still others seek advice or want to discuss some painful or puzzling experience. Many can use a smile, a laugh, a hand held in silence--nothing more. They seek the witness of faith, hope, and love in us with what is almost a greediness.

Jesus feeds us in his compassion, too. And he bids us to go forth and feed others in his name. That is something we cannot do if we are so intent on meeting what we perceive to be our own needs, that we cannot see the real needs of others—we dismiss their demands as inconvenience and interruption, much as the disciples focused on their inability in the face of the enormity of feeding such a large crowd, not recognizing that Jesus was quite able to meet every need. He still is!

God places people and their needs in our lives every day. I pray God will give each of us the grace to see those needs and the willingness to respond.

That is our real work -- the work to which he calls each and every one of us.