A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***“Come Away”***

Mark 6:30-34

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For many people summer is time for a vacation. Some people are able to take luxury retreats to exotic destinations. Others are able to get away for only a few days to a local river or to visit family for a long weekend. I met a woman from deep east Texas at the 4th of July fireworks down at the stadium. She was standing in line for a corn dog. You’ve never met anyone this side of instagrammed selfies in front of the silos happier to be in Waco. She was thrilled to be with her family in the big city to see the fireworks. There’s something so restorative about getting away from the normal routine, and many people will say it was the simple vacation, not the exotic trip, that brought truest happiness.

The reason I’m thinking about all of this is that in the Gospel reading from Mark 6, Jesus invites his disciples to “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest for a while.” Nowhere here is this given a label like vacation, or retreat, or even a sabbath. It’s just an invitation -- come away with me. It may even be more command than invitation, though some commands are so welcome, they are received like welcome invitations.

Most of us would eagerly jump at the chance. Or so we say. The reality is, if people responding to surveys are telling the truth, people nowadays, Americans in particular, don’t take vacation time. The reasons are familiar to you. People say: when I was hired I was told I could take four weeks of vacation, but anytime I try to get away, I’m made to feel ashamed. Or, I have to take my work with me. Or, there’s so much to do, I might as well not take any time off. Or, I work on commission. I can take time off, but that’s money out of my pocket. Pressures to work and work and work some more keep piling up. My dad likes to remind me that when he started he was given two weeks each year, and that was it.

It would be easy to say, “Jesus tells his disciples and all of us that we should take time away, so you should do that.” But I think the reality is that many people do not feel in control of all their decisions, especially ones like this. Then add to that whatever is going on inside a person. You know what I’m talking about? For some people it’s drive to succeed. For another it’s fear of failure. For another it’s total identity with producing. Whatever that thing is inside you that keeps you locked in.

Let’s also acknowledge that for many people having any kind of work is a lifeline. There’s no taking time off, because every dollar makes the difference between making it this month and missing a car payment. Time off means being laid off. Many people are in a position that they’ll take any work they can get anytime to try to keep one step ahead of the repo man. It’s too bad we’ve created that kind of society. The biblical writers didn’t think of time off from work as a luxury or privilege. It was woven into the foundations of the society through the Ten Commandments. They remembered what it was like to work literally as slaves to the Egyptians, so when they had a chance to shape their own society, they said, never again. Never again will we work or require other people to work all the time. We’ll have a day a week, when it will all stop. This will be woven into the fabric of our society, in our farming, in everything we do. We will not do this to ourselves, and we will not be beholden to the relentless drumbeat of production. We’ve lived that life and it’s called slavery. There’s a time to work and a time to stop, a time to labor and a time to rest. Americans have the first part of that nailed down: a time to work, but when does that stop?

Yet the reality is that we don’t really have “a time to work” nailed down. We’ve welcomed so many distractions into life that work for many people becomes a shuffle between doing something reasonably productive and watching cat videos, thinking through some hard problem, and checking the last blaring news headlines. As our attention spans grow shorter, our ability to do real, good work diminishes. For those working in more mentally oriented fields, good work is harder to quantify than when you’re doing manual labor.

When we lived in rural North Carolina I worked some with a church member named Jerry repairing old barns and various other projects. Jerry was basically retired and picked up jobs to supplement what he had. I was his helper. On days we worked, we started at 8 am sharp and we got right to it: pulling off old slats, scraping paint, hanging siding, whatever it was. At 10 am sharp, we stopped. At first, I was young and full of juice; I wanted to keep working, but Jerry knew it was time to stop at 10 for a break: RC Cola and a pack of nabs. Translation: a soda and a pack of peanut butter crackers. We stopped working for 15 minutes, sat in the shade of the nearest tree and rested and talked about anything but work. At 12:30 we stopped for a 45-minute lunch at grandma’s house. Then back at it until the sun went down if necessary.

One day in September, 2001, we were working when one of Jerry’s friends drove up. He called us over to the cab of the truck where we listened to news reports from New York that there had been some kind of terrible plane accident or we were under attack. No one knew what was going on at the time. We listened in silence a few minutes. Then Jerry said, let’s get back to work. We hung siding on an old barn in silence until 12:30 as usual. Then Jerry simply said, “Well, let’s take off the rest of today.” I went home and prepared to call everyone in the community to a prayer service at the church for that night.

When you’re doing manual labor it’s pretty clear when you’re working and when you’re not. You know this. You’ve inched past road crews leaning on their shovels and wondered when are they ever going to finish this road? When you’re doing more mental work, the line can be muddied. I guess that’s why I’m not totally convinced that Americans are really working the 60-70 hours a week it feels like we are. I think work time is like a shallow puddle that keeps spreading out the shallower it gets. Texts and emails mean, as you know, that we live in a world where that puddle can easily form a thin layer of work over everything: early mornings, Sunday mornings, evenings at home, 2:00 in the morning. There’s a lot of good about a lot of flexibility, but it’s dangerous too.

Studying is like this too. You show me a student who says she was up all night studying for a test and I might believe you, but I think it’s pretty likely that I can show you a student who checked her phone every few minutes, had music playing, if not a tv show in the background, and never took a break from studying because she never really started. I wonder if many of us need to refocus on both work and rest. When we really get after it, we get a lot more done than when we meander mentally through a day not fully committed to either work or rest.

When Jesus invites his disciples to “come away” he’s inviting them from a period of intense, good, hard, meaningful work. Astute readers may have noticed here in Mark 6:30 that they are called apostles. It’s the only time in this gospel they are called apostles instead of disciples. As disciples, they watch Jesus and listen to Jesus and follow him. As apostles, they are emissaries, ambassadors, agents sent out on their own. Earlier in the chapter, their apostolic mission was given to them. Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits, instructions on travelling light, and sent them out two by two to all the villages. They went out and proclaimed to people they should repent. And people did. They cast out many demons, and they were cast out. They anointed with oil many who were sick, and they were healed. All that they had seen Jesus say and do, they now said and did, and it worked. Lives were changed, many of them.

After some period of time, the apostles returned to Jesus and told him all they had done and taught. They’d accomplished so much they surprised even themselves, maybe themselves most of all. How excited they must have been to come back and tell about this experience, this work, this gospel power! And just as surely, they must have been listening to hear one of those, “Well done good and faithful servants; you’ve been faithful in little, now I entrust to you much.” You’ve done well in the villages, now it’s time for the big cities; you’ve done well in Israel, now it’s time to go to the ends of the earth. Who knows exactly what they were expecting, but if I know human nature, it was a promotion, an advancement, more work, or at least an A grade from the teacher.

They’d gotten a taste of something we all crave. They’d tasted meaningful work. These guys were fishermen, tax collectors, all kinds of jobs maybe they liked, maybe they didn’t. Maybe it didn’t matter; no one asked them what they wanted to do with their lives. If daddy fishes, you fish. If daddy builds, you build. Now they’ve tasted something else; work, if we can call it that, with meaning. They’d touched lives, changed communities, healed sick people, made broken things whole. This was God’s work and when you’re doing God’s work, of whatever kind, it’s like you can feel lightning in your bones and thunder in your heart.

King David had a taste of it and he wanted more. In 2 Samuel, after doing all the things he’d done, King David seems a little restless, so announces he is ready to build a temple for God. “What do you think Nathan? You’re my pastor.” “Yes, of course, my King, a building project is just the thing we need. God is with you in this.” But God wasn’t with him in this and told Nathan to tell David, no, stop, rest. Someone else later will build me a house. For now, you just be. Be the king I want you to be. Lead this people to be the people I called them to be. You’re the house I live in. Not all work is what God wants from us.

We crave meaningful work. We all do, whether in our jobs or in organized volunteer or church work, or raising a family. We need to know we matter and one way we know we matter is when we have work to do with our hands, our lips, or our minds that we feel really matters. It’s nice to have a paycheck, and most of us are willing to work for that if we can’t have anything else. We’ve all done jobs like that, but we’ll work eight hours a day for a job; we’ll work twelve hours a day for a good boss, but you give someone meaningful work for something that matters, and they’ll give you everything they can.

When the apostles come back to Jesus excited, exhaustedly telling him everything, they are people who discovered the joy of work that matters, yet they were in need of discovering the need for rest, even from good work that matters. “Come away with me to a desolate place and rest.” We need good work; we need deep rest that we may be able to give ourselves to the good work wholeheartedly.

So many people were coming and going they didn’t even have leisure to eat. The idea of getting away for a bit by themselves must have sounded very nice. But it was not to be. They were about to discover what we know too. Easier said than done, in every respect. They go in a boat to a desolate place by themselves, but it would not stay that way for long. The crowds saw where they were going and raced to meet them there. The press of the crowds meets the tyranny of the urgent. The crowds did not appreciate their need for some time alone. The disciples wanted to cash their coupon for a retreat with Jesus, but Jesus showed compassion on the crowds instead, inviting them to stay for one of his signature miracle meals on the hillside in the desolate place.

Getting away is easier said than done. Now and then. Mark’s gospel is potholed by this reality:

Jesus is baptized, and then is driven to the wilderness where he is harangued by temptations.

He goes to synagogue, and begins teaching.

He goes into a private home and Peter’s sick mother-in-law needs healing.

At the end of the day, the whole city gathers at his door.

Rising early in the morning to pray, everyone starts looking for him.

At home, many gathered.

Beside the sea, all the crowds were coming.

He goes all the way to the foreign side of the lake, and is met immediately by a demoniac.

He goes back all the way to the other side, and the crowds are waiting there for him.

I count eighteen times from chapter 1 through 6 in Mark that in the same verse or in two consecutive verses, Jesus is doing something restorative, contemplative, or restful and right then and there is confronted by the pressing need of others. Eighteen times. He tries everything: at the sea, at the mountains, at home, at someone else’s home, late at night, early in the morning. If you’ve ever felt like your work, or all the emails, or the worrying news cycle is relentless, it’s not really new. For crying out loud, he’s finally on a boat, sleeping hard, when a storm comes up and the fishermen disciples can’t even steer their own boat. They have to wake him to fix the problem. No rest for the weary, not even when you’re the son of God.

DaySpring is a place of meaningful work and a place of rest, we hope, we intend, from the demands, the pressures, the noise, and the storms. The two really do go together. We do good work when we rest in God’s mercy; we rest well when we feel like we’ve done what we were made to do. Which comes first? I don’t know. Maybe neither necessarily comes first. Maybe it’s whatever you need the most at that time whether what you need is meaningful work or what you need is space to rest. Many of those who first shaped this church were weary from doing church work they didn’t feel was very meaningful and they yearned for a quiet place to simply be in the presence of God. Yet even thinking about that possibility opening up before them, just thinking about that brought such joy and energy that the work of shaping such a place felt like the most important thing they’d ever done. You’ve realized we got to name the road down here, right? It’s the Renewal Way.

It still feels that way to us:

In the place of busywork, we want to be part of something that matters.

In the place of restless time off, we want deep renewing rest in our souls.

We want to serve the Lord with apostolic authority and power for the healing and wholeness of the city.

We want to be disciples, humbly following where he leads, always our souls resting in him.

We don’t want a relentless drumbeat; we want music and silence.

Let this serve as an invitation to a life in which you do the work you were made to do, and rest joyfully in the arms of the One who made you. By his grace, may it be so for each of us and all of us together.

*Let us pray.* God of compassionate care and loving grace, grant us depth of faith and confidence in your love, that we might find our identity in you as the beloved.  Help us to acknowledge the power of Sabbath as a time to be renewed and refreshed to answering our many callings.  Give us a vocation, and then give us the grace to give ourselves wholeheartedly to your call. May you, the God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit.  Amen.

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