

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 89, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
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I joined the Episcopal Church while I was in college in Rhode Island in the early 70's. One of the older priests I got to know in that diocese was fond of telling me that he had a sailboat which he had named "Retreat." When someone called the church office looking for him, his secretary would tell the caller that Father Brown wasn't available because he was on retreat. The caller would naturally think that Father Brown was very holy and prayerful to be on a spiritual retreat.

When Jesus' disciples return from being sent out two by two, they are eager to talk about their experiences of going from village to village teaching and healing. Aware that they are tired from their travels, Jesus recommends they go on retreat to a deserted place for rest and renewal.

I remember the first actual retreat I ever went on was when I was still preparing to go to seminary. It took place at Rhode Island's version of Camp Chanco. It lasted no more than three days from Friday evening through Sunday. The retreat leader was an Episcopal monk named Father Tom Shaw, who much later would be elected Bishop of Massachusetts. I don't remember much of what he said to us except he told us to take all the time we needed for rest during the retreat. He encouraged us to go to bed early, sleep late and take naps during the day if we felt tired. I was surprised by how much rest I needed, but I shouldn't have been. At the time, we had two very young boys – a baby and a very active toddler.

Lack of adequate rest, we all know, is not good for us. It can cause health and emotional problems which impact our relationships and hamper our work productivity. It seems all the so-called labor saving devices we now have don't necessarily save us time for more rest.

Someone compared the human body to a tree branch. If it gets too much snow or ice on it, it will snap. Another example is a coat hanger or some other soft metal. If we bend it back and forth continuously, first the metal gets hot and then it breaks because the metal has gotten tired or fatigued. The same happens to us in less dramatic ways. We can be short-tempered and/or have poor brain function for even ordinary tasks. I get headaches if I don't get enough sleep two nights in a row. As parents we required our children to get a good night's sleep, but we don't always practice what we preached.

Jesus is demonstrating excellent care for his disciples when he says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Unfortunately, they don't get to be alone. The people of the land are hungry for the resources of God, which Jesus and now the disciples are

providing. When they arrive at their destination, the people are already there. Mark tells us they are like “sheep without a shepherd,” and Jesus’ heart automatically goes out to them.

Sheep without a shepherd won’t live very long. The shepherd leads the sheep to green grass and safe drinking water. The shepherd protects the sheep from predators. Most of the people who rushed to be with Jesus were living on the edge, barely subsisting from day to day, stretching every shekel to make ends meet, wondering if there would be food for their children the next day. They say that today about 2/3 of the world’s population is in this state.

These people need God more than the well-to-do because they have just about nothing else. We need God, too, but perhaps for other reasons. We need God to help us be more generous, accepting and understanding toward those who have so much less. We need God to give us compassionate hearts for these and those different from us.

The author of Ephesians is eloquent today about overcoming barriers that divide people one from another. While today Judaism and Christianity are distinct faiths, in the early years of the church, followers of Jesus were both Jews and Gentiles. This wasn’t an easy or automatic union. Both were distrustful of the other. Both thought the other was at best misguided if not altogether wrong-minded. We each have other people or groups today we think of in the same way and they think that way about us.

The author wrote to the first century Jews and Gentiles in the young church in Ephesus (in present day Turkey) and to us in the 21st century with all our various divisions that Jesus is our peace by way of his dying sacrifice: “...he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

With two southern women and a former northerner here, we’ve had some lively discussions in the church office about the confederate flag. I hope we have all learned from each other and have a greater appreciation for our differing points of view. I think I have.

I hope recent events have spawned all sorts of helpful conversations among you around the flag and present day race relations. As Christians our task is to build bridges and foster better relationships between people rather than construct higher walls of hostility. The church word for this is reconciliation. Elsewhere in the New Testament, St. Paul urges us to practice the “ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold used to talk about our need to have “undefended hearts.” I think he meant we are to try, first, to understand the other rather than try to impose or overpower the other with our point of view. I am sometimes guilty of the latter, I confess.

The writer of Ephesians states that peace exists and divisions are overcome by what Christ has already done on the cross. Our task then is to step into that peace and enjoy and celebrate the unity which is ours in Christ Jesus.

I was a bit apprehensive when I heard that Kaitlyn Jenner, formerly Bruce Jenner, was going to receive the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage at the sports awards show last Wednesday night. I didn't know how I would react, let alone how a theatre full of the greatest jocks in the world would react. Like me, I'm sure some in the audience were bewildered that she should receive the award, but I have to admit I was deeply moved by her heartfelt appeal to accept all people as they are. She said she wasn't on that stage to represent herself alone but for all the other transgender people who are afraid to be who they are – some of whom have been killed or committed suicide.

While I am firmly in the Christian camp, I like the COEXIST bumper stickers. Maybe if we all got enough rest, we could better coexist and lower our inclination for division. AMEN.