Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

It seems that Jesus is always teaching, preaching, and healing even when we don't notice. In the passage Ron reads for us today, those first disciples had gathered 'round. He wanted to bring them back together, to be with them, to listen to them, to hear from them about all that they had been experiencing out in the mission field where they were doing the work of the kingdom.

I’m sure that the things they recounted varied. Some were surely elated by marvelous experiences, positive encounters, new life springing forth. Some were no doubt dejected, having had a door or two slammed in their face, or feeling that they’d not been able to get through to someone despite their best efforts. Some were convinced of the importance of their work. Some, perhaps, were doubting, wondering why they had left work and family behind to pursue a dream that seemed elusive. Some were just plain tired, and some were tired of it all.

Jesus wanted to hear all this from them, and he wanted them to hear one another. He wanted to receive all that they had to share in a spirit of compassion and understanding. In this listening and receiving, he was offering them healing. And he wanted to teach them how to do the same for one another, knowing that’s not always easy for us when our experiences differ, when our needs differ, when our perspective about what’s going on or what should come next, differs. As he offered compassion to them, he modeled how they might show compassion to themselves and one another.

Seems to me that this speaks to us quite directly now in these days and weeks and months of living into a new chapter of life as we continue to assess COVID’s impact on us and on how we are to now live together. Our feelings and reactions are not all alike, even within ourselves. We can feel happy and confident and rarin’ to go, and we can feel hesitate and uncertain. We can feel great without a mask, and safer with one. We can reach out for a hug, and we can draw back out of caution. We have different notions of safe behavior and safe practices. Parents are sorting out what’s best for their unvaccinated children. And we’re all keeping an eye on the virus’s variants and how rising numbers of COVID cases might cause us to take a step back and revise our plans.

These are not easy times for any of us. It’s not always easy to navigate our way through our differences with one another. And I suspect that we’ll be in this phase of reorientation, adaptation, and adjustment for a while.

The advice we get from health experts can change as we continue to learn more about this virus. There are still a lot of unknowns, Dr. Barbara Ferrer, Director of the LA County Department of Public Health, recently stated. She went on to stress that it’s incumbent upon us all to look out for one another, to do all we can to keep ourselves and others safe. She said: “We’ve gotten through this pandemic by taking care of each other. We need to continue to take care of each other.”

That bottom line fits right in with what Jesus is teaching his own disciples in today’s story. Listen. Be patient. Stay flexible and tolerant of your differences. Love one another, and love your neighbor as yourself.

In addition to teaching them, Jesus wants to help them heal, and that means—take a step back, get some distance, and get some rest. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves,” he said to them, “and rest a while.”

Well, you heard the story. That “while” didn’t last very long, did it? Hungry for their presence, their words, their healing ministries, a great crowd followed them, wanting more. And Jesus had compassion on them, too, that great crowd of hurting, hungry people. He saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd, and our Good Shepherd had compassion on them all.
All well and good, you may be thinking, while still asking yourself: what about that rest Jesus had offered his own disciples? Things don’t seem to come to pass quite as Jesus intended. As that old saying goes: “life is what happens while you’re making other plans.”

Jesus seems to shift and go with what is clearly needed in the moment. Instead of the week-long spiritual retreat he might have had in mind, they carry on with the work of ministry.

I’m hoping that the disciples found some renewal, if not a lot of rest per se, simply by being together, by sharing stories and knowing they weren’t alone. I hope they found rest in Jesus’ assurance that he was with them, and he loved them and that he would always find ways to care for them.

I hope that we can find ways to offer that same compassionate presence, listening ear, listening heart, to those around us in these days. So many are exhausted from the pressures and pace of this past 16 months. Teachers, parents, students, kids, health care workers, counselors, business people trying to balance work with home and family care. Through these 16 months of living with a pandemic, we have all been doing a lot of extra emotional, mental and spiritual work and are probably more drained than we even realize.

I hope that we can all find rest and renewal these days in a few quiet moments in God’s presence, moments of silence and prayer, moments to draw near to the creating Spirit of God and find new life for our hearts and souls. Moments in worship. Quiet time in the sanctuary. Solace and beauty in nature.

Let’s find ways to listen to one another’s stories and to share one another’s load, and in so doing, to provide moments for rest and renewal.

And my hunch is that, just as Jesus and those first disciples discovered so poignantly that day, there will always be people showing up in need of healing and care. How do we stay open to folks from the larger community who show up, knocking, asking, requesting. How will we stay attentive to unexpected needs that may arise? How do we stay centered ourselves so as to be able to respond with compassion in the manner of Jesus?

We cannot know with certainty now just what the next few months will hold for us, for our families, for our congregation. We may have to pivot and launch into something we hadn’t intended or foreseen, just as Jesus did that day long ago. Fortunately, one thing this pandemic has taught is perseverance, requiring of us flexibility and resilience.

And through it all, comes the unending refrain of the “old, old story of Jesus and his love,” love through God’s creating Spirit, that is and always will be with us, gathering us in, opening our hearts, listening to our stories, inviting us to rest, teaching and healing and renewing us, and sending us out again and again to a world in need of that love and amazing grace.

Notes:

