

“Optional R & R”

Sometimes we just need a break. Amen? In reading today's gospel lesson I'm reminded of an event that happened not too long ago to my younger sister, Liz, whom you all met my first Sunday here. She had just finished her first year of pharmacy residency rotation at Wake Baptist Health and had planned months in advance to enjoy some much needed rest and recuperation (R & R) with her soon to be fiancé on a cruise to the Bahamas. She was so excited in going that when the vacation was near in sight she posted all over social media her own countdown to the departure from Charleston. When the day finally came, they boarded the cruise ship and were shocked to find out just how easy it was to get on without any problems or delays. They found their way to the top deck and were waiting to depart, enjoying the Charleston view, when all of a sudden she heard a familiar voice call out her name and noticed it was one of our cousins. He was on the same cruise. Which at that point my sister finds out that he and his whole family are on the same 5 day cruise with them and then proceed to intrude on their vacation plans by including themselves in all their dinner reservations and all their planned activities. Needless to say it was hilarious getting her updates throughout the week on the odds of that happening and how she just wished she could just get a little bit of ME time that she had been looking forward to and had planned for.

We know all too well interruptions happen. And we know any interruptions in our daily routine or in our planning is a problem. Throw a monkey wrench into our plans and the majority of us will lose it. Especially when we make plans for some much needed rest and recuperation. We may plan for a vacation to get our R & R, but yet interruptions seem to happen. For all busy people, managing our time is an art. However, handling these interruptions gracefully becomes

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another art form entirely. In looking closely at this Sunday’s gospel lesson we see how Jesus deals with the demands of the crowd which forces him to change his plans.

The lectionary splits the reading into two sections omitting the feeding of the 5,000 and the miraculous act of Jesus walking on water. In the first section, verses 30-34, the disciples come to Jesus to tell him all the mighty acts they have done in his name. If you remember the gospel reading two weeks ago, Jesus had sent them out in twos to preach repentance and to perform miracles. Now they have come to debrief and tell of all the healing and good works they had done. In listening to their travels he hears their exhaustion and tells them to escape to a remote place and rest for a while. This is a great idea! But, it’s like Beatle-mania! there are so many people in the crowd constantly coming in waves to be anointed or healed that the disciples don’t have time to eat or even find a place to rest. So Jesus and the disciples nonchalantly make their leave and begin to make their way to their secret place for much needed R & R, and peace and quiet, but the crowds aren’t so easily fooled. They keep close watch of their boat and beat them to the other side of the lake on foot. (its important to note that this lake or sea of Galilee wasn’t but 8 miles wide- its smaller than Lake Moultrie). The crowds presence before they even land creates havoc on their plans to retreat, and on their need for distance from the crowds relentless demands. The crowd is constantly their interrupting their chance at R & R.

They clearly have reason for impatience with the relentless crowd, but Mark says that when Jesus saw the crowd, “he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Rather than being intruders on their R & R the crowd becomes for Jesus his main object of deep concern. He sees their aimless wandering and desperation as people with no direction or commitment, and begins to have a teaching moment with them. He begins to interpret, instruct, and nudge them to get them to see a better way.

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Its amazing to see how Jesus handles this interruption into his life and the life of the disciples. How his compassion for the intruders overrides his concern for order. He turns this mandatory R & R into an optional R & R. In time, he will finish his teachings with them and dismiss the crowds and find his own time, make his own time, to go off alone to pray, but not before being the shepherd to the shepherdless flock. Jesus is saying my rest can wait, being a shepherd to these people is more important to me than my rest. This is important, because what is being said here is that Jesus will not rest if there is a chance at teaching them a better way.

It is true, few can handle interruptions the same way Jesus did, with grace and compassion. Sometimes I feel I'm more like the crowd than Jesus in this passage. I'm one of those in the crowd whose frantic and unfocused life is desperately seeking answers to what to do and where to go, very much like a lost sheep needing a shepherd. But I've come to know that as hysterical and overwhelming life can be at times Jesus never seems to be worried or put off by my interruptions, by my constant need of his compassion and grace. In other words, this passage confirms his extraordinary openness and availability to us. We can go to him with any of our needs and know our needs will be met, always.

So, my challenge for you today is this: which are you? Are you like the overwhelmed disciples constantly being interrupted? Or are you like one in the crowd wandering aimlessly like a sheep desperately seeking direction from the shepherd? If you're like the disciples then I challenge you to pray this week for Christ's compassion to replace your order of things. Allow God to take control. If you're like one in the crowd I challenge you to continue to be shameless and bold in interrupting Christ with any of your problems in prayer.

He is waiting. He is listening. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.