

lec 16B (proper 11), July 21, 2024  
Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56  
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In the story we hear today, the writer of Mark brings us into a hectic scene. Jesus and his disciples were busy—crazy busy. The Twelve have regrouped after their successful mission tour. Jesus sent them out, two by two, to preach repentance, to heal the sick, and to cast out demons. Now, they've come together to report all they have done. They have returned to the press of the crowds, "many were going and going," Mark tells us, "and they had no leisure even to eat. So Jesus counsels, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

They get in a boat to get away from the crowds, but the crowds catch sight of them and arrive at the destination first—they're already waiting for the disciples. That deserted place of refuge is now a mob scene.

Next week you'll hear John's version of what happened next in some of the verses that are left out of today's reading, but here's a spoiler: not only has this crowd crashed the retreat, but they've also come in such a hurry that they haven't brought anything to eat. The hard-working disciples, who barely have a chance to eat themselves, now have to come up with a picnic for several thousand people.

"The disciples had no leisure, even to eat."

Can you relate? We're the country that practically invented fast food, and many of us eat on the run, at least sometimes. You've probably grabbed a bagel going out the door some mornings, or eaten lunch at your desk, or driven through the take-out window at a fast-food restaurant. And I bet some of you—maybe many of you—sometimes eat a meal in the car, coming and going from somewhere.

There's a lot written about the long hours in our country. Americans don't have the longest work weeks in the world, far from it—that is the situation of people in countries with fast-developing economies. But we do stand out among nations like ours, the developed economies of Europe, where mature economies usually mean shorter work

weeks and more vacation time. The highest earners in our country often work sixty hours a week or more. And on the other end of the scale, many people struggle to support themselves on part time work or in the so-called gig economy, taking on multiple part time jobs to try to put together a living wage.

Of course this is nothing new. A book titled *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Juliet B. Schor) was published in 1993. We've been talking about "work-life balance" since the 1980s. But these challenges have been heightened as new technologies shape our work and private lives.

We're more connected than ever, in national and global economies. Increasingly we expect that that services are available 24/7—once just the emergency room and 911; now fraud alerts, tech support, gas stations, grocery stores, and all those on line services—shopping, dating, gambling. Companies do business all over the world, no longer operating in one physical location. But that means more people are working all night, because their colleagues or their clients are in other time zones. Commuting used to be a liminal zone, a time to make the transition from work to home. Now, we can easily work from our cars, and I confess I've yielded to the temptation to make phone calls or send texts while I'm on the road. (Hands free, of course. But still distracting.)

Achieving that ever-elusive "work-life balance" is more of a struggle than ever. During the pandemic we learned how to work from home, and many have resisted giving up that flexibility. But this means it's ever more challenging to maintain boundaries between work and the rest of life. Remember weekends? Seventy percent of people who work remotely do some of that work on weekends. It's hard to declare you're done for the day, when your work space is right here. And increasingly the expectation is we're available around the clock to co-workers, bosses, or clients.

We've gotten used to instant connectivity—these days, email is too slow for anyone but Boomers, and who uses the phone? I've gotten fewer than a dozen messages on the church phone, in more than a year. Text is the way to go, those irresistible pings that summon you from whatever else you're doing.

It all adds up to more and more distraction, keeping us from being fully present with the people who are in front of us. Pastors are not immune...we might even be the worst. When I served in Baltimore I participated in a weekly Bible study to discuss the readings and psalm for the coming Sunday. (Bishop Gohl was in that group, years before he was a bishop, and he still attends.) There were usually 8 or ten of us, sometimes 15 or 20, meeting for an hour and a half. Just about every week, we were interrupted by somebody's phone, with that person then leaping up with apologies to take the call. (And at first this was even before smart phones—we were rocking flip phones.) I often felt annoyed by this. And yes—I've done this myself. It's my practice to mute my phone and put it out of sight when I'm in a meeting. But sometimes I forget, and when the ring tone or the ping arrives, there I go.

How many things in a pastor's work life can't wait for 90 minutes? Now of course pastors want to be there for our parishioners—for you—but are we really serving others, or ourselves, or God, by responding instantly to everything?

Many of you are retired. And many people long for retirement, an imagined domain of freedom and flexibility. It can be that, and may it be so for you. But the unbounded time of retirement has its own challenges. You take on all those household projects you've deferred, and soon you're working all day in the basement or the yard, or acting as your own general contractor to coordinate what needs doing. Adult children call on you—you're retired! Your grandchildren need you. All sorts of worthy organizations want your time and expertise. And yes, we're one of them. I hear those conversations at a meeting or in the fellowship hall about someone who's about to retire—maybe he'll head up that ministry team! Maybe she can be the tech coordinator we've been looking for! Now they can run for Council, again! And before you know it, you are coming and going, with no leisure even to eat. Maybe you're even wondering if you should go back to work so you can get some rest.

Jesus healed many, laid his hands on the sick and suffering, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. But even he needed rest.

After they had fed the thousands in the crowd, Jesus told the disciples to get back in the boat and go to the other side. Then he sent the crowd away and went off to pray by himself. Even as the crowds pursued him, as thousands clamored for his healing presence, he found solitude for rest and prayer.

Let the Good Shepherd lead you this day, to rest and refreshment. To lie down in green pastures, to walk beside still waters, to rest, that your soul might be restored.

And come to the table prepared for you, eat and drink with Jesus.