

Wide Open Spaces

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

July 22, 2018

A little while ago, I posted a picture on Facebook of a woman reclining on an old-fashioned fainting couch, arm theatrically raised above her brow. “I’m tired of adulting”, she says. “Please don’t make me adult today”. Boy, that sensation certainly hasn’t gotten any better. In her reflection last week, Elaine Thomas, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Hoboken, began a litany of what’s been going on in the world recently: “More than 2,300 children separated from their parents on the border. 11,000 Puerto Ricans are still without power following Hurricane Maria’s devastation last September. Four years after lead contamination, Flint, Michigan, still does not have clean water. A devastating volcano rocked Guatemala earlier this month. More than 8 million people are threatened by famine in Yemen, and 2.5 million have been displaced by Civil War. Roughly 5 million refugees have fled Syria. 2 million have been displaced in South Sudan. And then there is Myanmar, and mass incarceration in the U.S., and environmental degradation, and the rise in white supremacist activity, and on and on.”

I would also add the Brexit discussions, tariffs, NATO, violence in Nicaragua and the Helsinki Summit. On the plus side, we all rejoiced at the miraculous rescue and release from the hospital of the Thai soccer team and their coach. And I loved that they apologized for all the fuss, but really, this does not even out the Karmic balance.

Oh, and we all have personal lives too, don’t we? We pretend we are the responsible people in the room as we raise children, tend relationships with family and friends, support aging parents or partners, acknowledge that we ourselves are not as young or resilient as we once were. Which is to say that even those whose careers are not in the “helping professions”, are always living in a “helping profession”. Because we care. As we should.

The problem is that we are living our lives like marathon runners, from water break to water break grabbed on the run and eventually we will crash and burn. Yes Virginia, like Santa Claus, Compassion Fatigue is a real thing.

Here’s where time management can be helpful. I’m told. Hypothetically. I am told that the world will continue to spin if I take a moment or two for self-care in the midst of global crisis, I’m just not sure that I believe it.

I’m in good company though. In today’s gospel reading, we find the disciples desperately trying to take a breath. We are told “for many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to

eat”. So Jesus tells them to stop for a minute. To go somewhere quiet for a second or two and regroup. Sometimes it just takes a minute, which is good because that’s all Jesus and the disciples got, because “many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them”. And in between the two sections that we read, skipped over in today’s lectionary, was the feeding of the five thousand, because really sometimes it just never ends.

Jesus tried to enforce the idea of good self-care, Sabbath, a break for refreshment, even if it was short. That little micro break enabled them to greet the crowd that followed them with compassion rather than weariness and stress and to get back to God’s work of healing the wounded.

A little bit at a time, that’s my goal. Ironically, in a previous lifetime when I was a special education support teacher, part of my job was to help students break a big job down to small achievable goals, smaller steps interspersed with breaks, rewards, “little Sabbaths”, if you will. My students were really good at it. On the other hand, I stink. I suffer from what Bruce Epperly calls time sickness. He asks “how often do you eat on the run, or go to a nice bistro for lunch and spend more time on your iphone rather than enjoying your meal? How often do you spend lunch at your desk, between bites checking your email, glancing at memos or making calls?” I’d also add, how many of us spend our time in the car on the phone rather than enjoying the scenery?

He says “Contemplation and action, Sabbath and hard work, exist in dynamic relationship. Today, most of us struggle to take time for Sabbath. We have trouble getting away from it all to spend time in recreation and rest with family and friends.” He says that time is relative, and that Sabbath opens us to spacious living. Spacious, open-hearted living.

All the natural disasters, all the poverty illness and heartbreak, all the true evil in the world..many of us think that if we just keep busy, if we call every congressman, if we write every letter, if we never stop, then maybe we won’t notice that we are tired, that our hearts hurt and that our souls are weary. Jesus tells us today that we’re wrong. That if we don’t allow ourselves to be Sabbath people then we will lose our ability to be compassionate people. I forget that I am called not to do, but to care. That God’s love for me is not contingent on how much I get done but on how I treat the people I am doing it with. And guess what? We all deserve to give that compassion we’re so proud of to ourselves. Taking that break, allowing ourselves to stop and put the spinning plates down just for a second allows us space to see more clearly and to be able to see the horizon, the wide open space, the one that’s usually obscured by our gotta-keep-busy-or-everything-will-fall-apart-without-me list.

I’ve probably shared this quote before, but it does bear repeating, if for no other reason that Saint Nadia said it and so it must be true, but those of us who care, can use the reminder. Those of us who are Sabbath –challenged can use a reminder. Those of us who feel we need to solve all the ills of the world can use a reminder. “Sacred rest is a break from the am-I-productive-enough, lovable enough, safe enough, thin enough, rich enough, strong enough-worthiness system we live

under. The sacred rest that is yours never comes from being worthy. It never comes through adopting the right kind and the right amount and the right quality of spiritual practices (although if those bring you a sense of well-being then by all means don't set them aside) the rest that is yours and mine comes from the promise of the Gospel: that Jesus came to save sinners, that Jesus came to heal and love and save the sin-sick and the over-functioning, that Jesus came to give rest to the weary, and the restless, to give rest to harried housewives and overworked social workers and mildly depressed executives.

So rest. Rest knowing that you are justified, not by your busyness, but by grace through faith. Rest in the knowledge of how madly God loves you. Not because of who you are, but because of who God is. Rest in that. Not because you should. But because you can.”

Now, get back to it and make those phone calls!

Amen.