

The Rhythms of Life

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: Matthew 14:13-23a

Throughout my years in the ministry, I frequently have led conferences for ministers. Most of these seminars have been for pastors who are experiencing “burn-out” and a growing sense of disconnect between who they are, and who the church wants them to be. Burn-out has been described as going through the motions of life, even though the soul has departed. My friend, Mark Minear, has described burnout as the hamster wheel still spinning, but the hamster has died!

I would suppose that the shared experiences of the ministers in the groups I lead could be multiplied throughout the spiritual landscape. Such experiences of burn-out are not necessarily debilitating, but they are detrimental to personal health, and stifle ministerial effectiveness. It robs us of the spiritual vitality that inspires and excites us, and gives us passion for doing our work. And such burn-out is not just limited to ministers.

In an effort to understand such fatigue, I have been helped by studying the pattern of life modeled by Jesus. Throughout the Gospels we discover a pattern of encounter with the world, and then withdraw from the world for spiritual renewal. What becomes apparent from reading about the life of Jesus is that he understood

his effectiveness in the world to be directly related to his ability to have times away from both his ministerial duties and his disciples.

As we officially begin summer, I thought that it would be good to talk about the rhythms of life and specifically the kind of life rhythm that was demonstrated by Jesus.

In the scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples have just told Jesus about the death of John the Baptist. “Now when Jesus heard this,” Matthew writes, “he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” Jesus was grieving the loss of his friend. He needed time away to deal with his grief and to recharge his spiritual batteries. But the crowds followed him. And although he was still in need of time away, he had compassion for them, and began to cure the sick. As evening came, the crowds were still there...in that deserted place...and the disciples began to get concerned about how they were going to eat. “Send the crowds away,” they told Jesus, “so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Unmoved, Jesus ordered the crowds to sit down in the grass. He blessed five loaves of bread and two fish—all of the food the disciples had with them—gave the food back to the disciples and told them to distribute it. Well, you know the rest of the story. All ate, over 5,000 people, and all were filled, even leaving 12 baskets of leftovers.

Now, I could have made this miracle story the focus of this message. Instead, I want to focus on the *boundaries* of the story. In the two verses just following the miracle story, Matthew writes, “Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.”

And so, in this 14th Chapter of Matthew, we have Jesus going to a deserted place by himself in verse 13—just prior to the miracle story—and in verses 22 and 23—just after the miracle, he is sending his disciples out in a boat, saying good-bye to the crowds, and then going up the mountain by himself to pray.

I love the way that Jesus hurries the disciples into the boat, as if they are guests who have stayed past their welcome! The whole scene reminds me of the old Saturday Night Live skit with John Belushi, where he played, “The Thing That Wouldn’t Leave.” The disciples are “The Things that Wouldn’t Leave!” Jesus needs a little “ME time!”

Although much has changed since the time of Jesus, the human condition is still the same. The encounters with the world have certainly increased, making “time away” more necessary for the good of our spiritual lives. What we all need is a contemporary understanding of “deserted place,” where we can be spiritually renewed.

In his book, **Sacred Eyes**, Robert Keck writes: “Religion if it is doing its job, gives more intentionality than other institution to providing a well, as it were, for access to the underground river of the soul. Ideally, that is the special role of religion in our culture. The root of the word religion is *religare* which means, ‘to bind back’ or ‘to reconnect.’ Religion, if it is true to its name, assists us in reconnecting with our soul.”

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself”... “And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray...” It is the beginning of summer time—the traditional season in our culture for “time away” on a boat, or going to the mountains, or going to the coast and sitting on the beach. It is a time for Renewal, Reflection, Re-Creation, Remembering, and getting in touch with that inner child that is within us all. As Paulo Coelho reminds us, “Human wisdom is madness in the eyes of God. But if we listen to the child who lives in our soul, our eyes will grow bright. If we do not lose contact with that child, we will not lose contact with life.”