

Rest a While

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Thirty-two years ago next month I was ordained into what we Presbyterians call the ministry of word and sacrament. It has been a glorious gift and a wondrous calling. I had before that moment – and have had it only deepened since – the notion, however, that what I do, what ministers do, is no more or less difficult, and certainly no more or less important, than what any of us do. If I believe in what Martin Luther called the “priesthood of all believers,” and I do, and if I believe in a Reformed notion of vocation, that all are given gifts to serve the common good, and I do, then ministry is simply one vocation among many, one calling among equals. A whole bunch of baptisms of a whole bunch of babies is a reminder of that, baptism being the only credential we will ever really need.

We get in trouble as ministers and we get in trouble as a church if we begin to believe certain things – that ministers are more special, more holy, more

whatever, than anyone else. “To each is given a gift for the common good,” Paul wrote, and I believe that.

Nor do I believe that we work harder – in whatever ways we work – than anyone else, that while we work hard – in whatever ways we work – and that while our work has its particular challenges, we are not overworked anymore than lawyers are, or teachers are, or parents are, or restaurant servers are, or police officers are, or sanitation workers are. So no more important, nor no more difficult.

However, the work I do is the work I do, and so just like any other profession, I pay attention to conversations about that work. So much so that when someone posted a few weeks ago on Facebook a provocative question, I paid attention.

“Does anyone know,” my friend asked, “of ministers who are simply quitting, without knowing where they will go next?” Ministers move on for a variety of reasons – a new call, retirement, a difficult situation. But this was different.

Quitting (a harsh word), resigning, for none of those reasons, with no place to go next. Maybe they will eventually land at a church. But maybe they will leave ministry altogether.

And once asked, the answers to the question came quickly. Yes. Yes. Yes. Some of the people I knew, or knew of. And there was no judgment, no shame. There was certainly concern, lots of thoughts and prayers. It is a new and until now unknown phenomenon. It's certainly COVID related, and perhaps more than that.

And it's not just ministers. Perhaps you know people in your professional worlds who are doing the same. It's happening in the legal profession, the business world. Perhaps you heard the NPR story a few weeks ago about something called "the great resignation." ("As The Pandemic Recedes, Millions Of Workers Are Saying 'I Quit'") Reporter Andrea Hsu wrote: "As pandemic life recedes in the U.S., people are leaving their jobs in search of more money, more flexibility and more happiness. Many are rethinking what work means to them, how they are valued, and how they spend their time. It's leading to a dramatic increase in resignations — a record 4 million people quit their jobs in April alone, according to the Labor Department."

The great migration, Hsu wrote, to remote work in the pandemic has also had a profound impact on how people think about work. She quotes Tesdel Neeley of Harvard Business School: "'We have changed. Work has changed. The way we think about time and space has changed.'" Workers now crave the flexibility given

to them in the pandemic — which had previously been unattainable. Said one worker: “I do need to pay bills, so I have to work.” But he now believes work has to accommodate life.

Much of this is certainly COVID related. Of the many things that it will be important to track over these next years, this is one of them. Work – its meaning, its availability, its social role and personal role. Will people work less, or less intensely, to achieve a different balance? What are the long-term impacts of remote work, work from home? As I talked to many of you who did just that, a spectrum of responses emerges. For some, it worked well. Others, not so much. It depended on your actual job, your setting, your home accommodations, and your temperament. It seems clear, however, that COVID has changed things, some for the better, some for the worse. It can't be a bad thing if people want to be less consumed by their work, in hours, in intensity. Yet it must be a matter of concern if opportunities for meaningful work are diminished, if the economic recovery does not reach everyone, if the gap between those with well-paying jobs (work at home or otherwise) and those without continues to grow. The trend to resign because work was consuming you is notable – of course we don't want people to

work themselves to death, or ourselves, even if that's what we were conditioned to do. Still, I wonder, what's next?

This is a social question, an economic and political one, even an ethical one. But it's also a theological question, a central theological question. Labor efforts in U.S. history have often carried a religious flavor. The move, at the turn of the last century, as the Industrial Revolution heightened, toward a 40-hour work week, and an 8-hour work day, and child labor laws, was led by churches.

Some of you will remember "blue laws." Blue laws meant that businesses were not opened on Sundays, not just the ones whose closure we expect now, but all businesses. Grocery stores, gas stations and the like. Blue laws were a product of something called "sabbath observance." Individuals and families went to church on a Sunday, often more than once, and then, at home, reflecting on their faith. For the more restrictive, this also meant no movies or card games, or, gasp, no baseball. But it certainly meant no commerce.

Then something changed, around the start of the Second World War. In a fascinating article, Benton Johnson writes of "a profound shift towards secularism

and freedom (that) took place in the nation...(accompanied) by a “public ridicule of religion.”

First, businesses opened up, but we Protestants didn't frequent them. Then we did. In 1958 a Presbyterian General Assembly issued a report saying that the Sabbath, Sunday, should be a day for “worship, for instruction, for rededication, for family activities, for rest, and for Christian service and rejoicing.” It almost sounds quaint.

I am not interested in going back to those days. Nor am I interested in the legalism that often drove them. That is to say, the reason for sabbath is not to impose religious rules, but to worship God, and to nurture our spirits in doing so. We don't need blue laws, I would suggest. But I wonder – even though I am a practitioner – if we really need that roasted red pepper hummus from Wegman's at 2:00 a.m. on a Tuesday night, or if certain things we now expect to do on a Sunday can't wait, for our own spirits and souls, for the spirits and souls of those workers whose work we now expect, and for a world groaning with deep fatigue and relentless pressure.

And I wonder as well, how we, as workers, as leaders of workers, as former workers, can explore the post-pandemic questions about work and life that are emerging: about commuting, about what is gained and lost when working remotely, about equity for women in the workplace, about erasing lines between upper and lower, or work and life, about working to live rather than living to work,

Jesus might not have understood the gig economy, or a work text that pings your phone in the middle of the night, or being able to order something anytime, or the notion that remote workers actually work longer than onsite workers, but he understood the dynamic driving all of that this, the forces, good and bad, of sabbath, and rest, and the spiritual needs that frame it. Remember that he broke the sabbath by healing someone in need, or ate on the sabbath – but what he really did was challenge sabbath legalism.

Jesus understood. He understood that we cannot be about outputting, that workaholicism is about the condition of our soul, as is burnout. He understood about equity. He understood Sabbath, the horizon of Sabbath, the reasons why creation, and creatures, needed rest.

And so we come to today. Jesus has been working and teaching in intent and intense ways. And though Mark doesn't say this, this must have been the case as well – that the disciples, his followers, had been dealing in their own ways with all of that. They were managing crowds. They were moving quickly from place to place. They were, no doubt – because they had dropped their nets to follow, remember – hustling for food or other means of support. And...they were living with whatever their own responses were to all that Jesus was saying or doing. It must have been exhilarating. It also must have been exhausting.

And Jesus understood. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” That is all they needed to hear. That is all we need to hear. Jesus' compassion, and his invitation, his insistence.

It will be short-lived, of course. Read the rest of the episode and note how the crowds engage in hot pursuit. But for that moment, when he said “rest a while,” and they did, to a deserted place. That moment must help give shape and form to this moment. His compassion *then* must lead to our compassion *now* – to ourselves, to our loved ones, to those with whom we work, to those on whose services we rely.



We are in vacation season. This is about that, and more than that. It is about the fundamental, creaturely need to rest, every day, in some way, I would suggest, and for longer periods of time from time to time, even if not one day out of seven.

It is not about the old legalism, but a new realization, made even clearer in the pandemic, that we are called to be, created to be, more than producers, that work matters, that we are given gifts to serve, but that that service is diminished, and work becomes less constructive, when the cycle and rhythm of work and life and rest is mis-calibrated.

Work matters, yes. But so does rest. And so does play. And so does worship. But to work at our best, as Jesus understood, we must disengage to reengage, or, in the words of Steph Curry, we have to refresh to be fresh.

And as much as we pay attention to this for ourselves, we must do so for others – that is the ethical demand before us, especially as we emerge from COVID. As Jesus has compassion on his followers, and by extension, us, so must we have compassion for ourselves, and, by extension, others – those we know and love and those who will remain strangers to us, though always important strangers.

And I fully understand that all of this is easier said than done for many, either because you're driven by internal expectations or external realities. I understand that. But I also know that if we do not pay attention to the need for rest, to tend to our weariness in whatever ways it comes to us, that we will be diminished, which is not God's intention or us.

So that when Jesus says, "Come away and rest a while," it is not a frivolous thing, or a sign of weakness, but a deep calling, and a reminder to receive and reflect compassion, especially for such a time as this. Amen.