Sermon for The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: July 22, 2018

Preached at Christ Episcopal Church in Los Altos  
Text: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56  
Title: Shining

I was recently reading the reflections of a renowned Christian author and Catholic priest, written from the serene quiet of Genesee monastery in upstate New York, where he was passing an extended time of retreat and renewal. He writes about the things you might expect someone new to a monastery to write about: the comforts and things and people he missed being so far away, so far removed; how the passing of time changes when immersed in the daily offices - those seven lovely liturgies monks observe at regular intervals throughout the day; the monotony of manual labor - in his case washing thousands of raisins for their bakery, when in his “regular” life he was a professor at an Ivy League University; and the allure and alarming strangeness of so much silence.

But many, many pages - more than you might think - are also dedicated to his lament about the state of the world and his prayers for those in peril. Even nestled in the remote, bucolic beauty of the natural world, monks have access to news and nearby towns. They talk with and write to friends and family. And so interspersed with thoughts on the Saint of the Day or a particularly moving conversation with the Abbott, he expresses his anxiety about the rise of so many dictatorial leaders in the world, the terrible human rights abuses perpetrated in various places, and the diminishing confidence people seem to have in democratic ideals and progress. After a few days of intense labor harvesting wheat and watching those golden grains loaded onto train beds, he thinks about the famines plaguing parts of Africa, the lives being lost, the cultures and economies being upended, and his heart breaks in particular for the children - hungry, starving, for so much more than food. As he muses about what baking bread for hours on end has to teach him about God and creation and life, he ends with a few notes about all the scandals in Washington, the chaos of the White House, and the rumors that the President will soon resign.

It was 1974, after all, and Watergate had gripped the nation, and over 300,000 people in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somali were perishing as the result of a devastating drought which caused widespread famine and massive displacement, and the Chilean coup of 1973, resulting in a military dictatorship, led to a great deal of reporting in the US on the torture and disappearance
of civilians there. It was 1974, and the author was Henri Nouwen, a celebrated pastoral and practical theologian whose teaching has shaped generations of Christian thinkers and believers.\(^1\) It was 1974, but his anxiety is so resonant, his lament so familiar, his sadness and grief and terrible sense of powerlessness as contemporary as can be.

I frequently hear people talk about how the rise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle and the countless ways we can now access information have led to greater levels of anxiety about the state of our communities and our world, but from time to time it is good to remember that, even if the intensity of this has increased, this reality is, itself, not new. The world is always pulling itself apart at the seams. People are perpetually repeating the mistakes of the past. And this is terribly distressing to witness, but it is not surprising. Which is part of why it is such a relief for us Christians to proclaim that our faith is not in the world, and our hope is not in people alone, which is not to say we don’t care for our hurting and hungry neighbors or our imperiled planet, but that how and why we care, and where we turn for inspiration, really matters.

Jesus also lived in a terribly troubling and trying time. The suffering of the world was not far away and foreign but urgent, closer than his iPhone screen, close enough to touch and smell and feel, but also close enough to heal. When we find Jesus this morning, he has been out and about do what he was always doing: teaching and healing, teaching and healing. He’s just called the twelve disciples, given them authority over Spirits, and sent them out, two by two, to do more of the same, and now they are coming back to him, tired, no doubt; distraught, perhaps; maybe enlivened and amazed by the things they were able to do, the things they had seen, the lives they had touched, and the ways their lives had been touched in return. Eagerly they share all of this with Jesus, their beloved friend and mentor, and he sees them - so earnest, so exhausted – and says, “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

Take a moment to really hear this. The disciples have been out doing good and grating and godly work, and no doubt they have barely made a dent in the hardships of those around them, their love and care and kindness but a drop in the ocean of sickness and stress and insanity and grief that so often defines human life. Jesus knows that there is more work to be done, “for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” But in that moment of return Jesus does not say, “welcome back, guys! I packed some bagged lunches for you – hope you like

PB&J on whole wheat. Now let’s get back out there and show them whose boss. Are you with me?” No. He says, “Well done, good and faithful friend. Let’s take a rest now.”

It seems to me that one of the great lies of our times is that you and I and all people are basically highly complex machines. We eat because, like machines, we need fuel to be productive. We drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and take supplements or various stimulants because, like machines, we want to boost our performance. We learn and think and acquire knowledge in order to accomplish the tasks set before us more efficiently and effectively. Sleep? An unfortunate design flaw. Human connection? Essentially optional. Love? Warmth? Feelings? Generally obstacles to the task at hand. At best, distractions. It is a terrible way of looking at the world, but if we actually pay attention to the assumptions driving our advertising industry, defining cultural norms work and play, we don’t have to work hard to see this lie in our world and ourselves.

But the truth is, we aren’t machines, and we weren’t gifted with this glorious life, blessed with the companionship of one another, immersed in such a breathtakingly beautiful and bracing world, just to do and make and buy more, more, more. As hard as it is to extricate ourselves from this lie, because it is so pervasive and persuasive, some part of us rebels. Some part of us knows we are creatures of dignity and grace, creatures of the earth with materials needs and wants and desires that are good and glorious, creatures intimately connected with one another and our creator, creatures created in the very image of God. This truth is asserted, over and over again, in the Bible, and one of its defining concerns is rest. God Godself takes a day of rest after doing the hard and holy work for creating the universe. God hallow that day, and commends it to us as a sacred discipline, the Sabbath. And then God commands us to rest not only one day a week but also give the earth a rest on a regular cycle: to let the lie land fallow one seventh of the time, because there is something about rest that is not only good and godly, but that leads to generativity and generosity, to fruitfulness and flourishing. And then God says don’t only do that, but every 49th year take an entire year off and dedicate it to worship and praise and renewal, and on that year cancel all your debts, free anyone in bondage to you, practice prodigal forgiveness, because there is also something about rest that makes for justice and mercy, that brings us closer together.

Maybe its because we are so powerless in the face of our need for rest, because it is so inexplicable, and so essential, revealing our common humanity. Maybe it is because when we
take a moment to pause, to step back, we see the world anew, and we notice how dependent we are on God and others and the earth, and there is something wonderfully and fearfully freeing in that. Maybe it is because when we slow down and get quiet, we reconnect with that rebellious part, the one rooted in God: God’s own abiding Spirit within. Honestly, I’m not sure, and I’m not sure it matters. Maybe it is all of the above. What matters is that here we have Jesus reminding us of our gifted, grace-filled vulnerability and dependence, telling his friends, “Thank you for your going out and your coming in. Now it is time to tend your body, mind, and spirit, because that matters to me, too.”

So they do. They “go away to a desert place by themselves.” And you know what Jesus does? He keeps on teaching and healing, teaching and healing. God works in and with and through us to be present with the suffering of the world and to accomplish great healing, but God keeps that up even when we need a break. Now I am not saying that we are called to lives that only include rest and retreat, delightful as a good massage or day of golf or time catching your breath in a monastery can be, but neither are we called to lives that exclude these things. Just as we are invited to participate in the remaking of the world, ushering in God’s kingdom, we are called to tend our creaturely needs, and to set aside time and space to reconnect with our source and sustainer.

Otherwise we’ll be too tired to notice when we slip into overdriven doing, as though we have to prove our worth or goodness or earn our place in God’s family, as if the fate of the world rests firmly on our shoulders and ours alone. We’ll be too disoriented to notice and name those things that are simply wrong, and to stand up for ourselves and others when called upon to do so. We’ll be too unmoored to recognize the lies the world tells us all the time, and eventually we will wind up too depressed, burned out, addicted, codependent, perfectionistic, demanding, angry, righteously indignant, or apathetic to be bearers of God’s love and light to that very same world.

I’ve had the opportunity to retreat in several monastic communities over the last fifteen years, and one thing I’m always reminded of while there is that there is always, somewhere, someone who is at prayer on behalf of the world, even on my behalf, who is holding me and the world in holy hope, and that even when I am sleeping there are other people teaching and healing, carrying on the ministry of Christ. There is a sobering sacredness in remembering I am part of a larger body, and that God is on the side of goodness, and that my small offering each
day really matters, just like the work and prayers of a stranger on the other side of the world really matter.

Thomas Merton, who largely brought contemplative practice back to Western Christianity in the mid-20th century, spent many years in a Trappist monastery in rural Kentucky. After one of his first extended stays in the monastery, Merton had to visit Louisville, and when he did he found re-entering the busy world as disoriented as entering the monastery had initially been, so fast and noisy and full was it, and he was also amazed to realize how being in the monastery changed how he saw the city and its people. There he stood at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the middle of a bustling shopping district as people rushed from one thing to another, a coffee in hand, a meeting about to start, running late, running long, running, running, and he was “suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers” simply because they shared the world, “the world of the bomb, the world of race hared, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution and all the rest.” Merton, a predecessor of Nouwen’s, was writing about an experience in the 50s. (The more things change the more they stay the same.)

But here’s the point. What he was feeling, this reorientation, recalibration of his vision, he describes as “the immense joy of being [hu]man, a member of a race in which God (God)self became incarnate … And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

We are called to be bearers of God’s love and light in the world, and we are also called to tend the love and light already within us through prayer and praise, rest and retreat. There is no telling people they have this light in them. We must all discover it for ourselves, and tend it for ourselves.

But here’s a secret, just in case: you, too, are shining like the sun. Amen.

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2 Quoted at length from Thomas Merton’s Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander in The Genesee Diary, page 146.