

Learning Rest

Mark 6:30-44

Introduction - What Do You Do To Chill Out?

What do you do to relax? Is there something that you really enjoy doing that recharges your batteries and helps you to feel refreshed? It's a running joke in my family that Alison likes to be very planned on our day off as we couldn't possibly leave relaxing to chance. Most people aren't quite so obsessive, sorry, I mean planned, but there are people who like going for rides, having coffee with friends, going for walks, pottering in the garden or doing a craft and so the list can go on.

It is interesting that research has found that the level of expense of a hobby or the extravagance of a holiday does not greatly increase people's enjoyment of it or the relaxation experienced. People of all strata of society are able to find refreshment, though this changes when you reach a point where people's need for sustenance / provision is under threat. People who don't know where their next meal is coming from live under a high level of stress which causes people to never fully be able to rest.

This morning we're going to see how Jesus wanted his disciples to learn that he is able to provide rest as well as sustenance and how this is still relevant for us today.

Disciples Needed To Rest (vv. 30-31)

The first thing we notice about this section is that there is a heavy focus on the disciples. Jesus focuses on the disciples and their need for rest and then the crowd, rather than just focusing on Jesus, notices the disciples and seeks to follow them. The **apostles** gathered round Jesus and reported to him all **they** had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that **they** did not even have a chance to eat, he said to **them**, 'Come with me by **yourselves** to a quiet place and get some rest.' So **they** went away by **themselves** in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw **them** leaving recognised **them** and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of **them**.

I mentioned last week that the section about John the Baptist's imprisonment and beheading is to teach about discipleship because it's sandwiched between two continuing sections where Jesus is instructing, appointing and teaching his disciples. This is the second section, picking up with the disciple reporting about the ministry they had done after Jesus sent them out.

It appears that the disciples had had an effective ministry going throughout the villages because now lots of people are coming to them (presumably for continued ministry) to the point where they don't get a chance to eat. The impact which the disciples had made is also seen where crowds of people recognise them (not just Jesus) and seek to follow them.

In light of this successful and busy time of ministry Jesus sees that the disciples needed to rest. Why is it that the disciples needed to have this time away from the crowds? From personal experience, I know that there are two times when I am particularly in need of stepping back, taking a breath and spending more time with the Lord. The obvious time is when I'm tired and weary after long days teaching and caring for people. The other is after a successful time of ministry. After successful times of ministry I might be all excited and enthusiastic but it I can also start to rely more and more upon myself and think that ministry is all about what I do, rather than on what Jesus is doing through me.

Jesus could be calling his disciples to step away and have a restful time with him for either of these reasons. It's obvious that the disciples had been having an effective ministry. They'd been teaching people, casting out demons, healing the sick and people were so desirous to spend time with them that they hadn't even had the chance to eat. It could be that they needed to take a step back and spend time with Jesus to remember who was the power behind their ministry. However, with all these people coming to the disciples that they couldn't even eat and so it may be that Jesus sees the disciples growing weary and knew they needed a breather. Whatever the reason, the disciples needed to rest and Jesus cares enough about them that he invites them to take time away from the crowds.

Crowd Needed Spiritual Sustenance (vv. 32-34)

However, there is a problem with the disciples taking time out to get some rest. The crowds see them travelling by boat and are able to race around the lake to get to the destination before them. The Sea of Galilee is only 21 km long and 13 km wide and so it's not hard for people to go around it.

I don't know about you but I do find it hard to be interrupted when I've been looking forward to sitting down for a meal with my family or watching a movie with friends or the like. I wonder if the disciples felt the same way? "Oh, come on! Can't we just have a picnic without interruption? Haven't these people ever heard of RDOs?!"

Whatever the disciples were thinking about the crowd, we're told that Jesus cared for the crowd, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things." In the previous little section in Mark's Gospel we're dealing with Herod, the so-called King who kills the faithful Israelites and so is no good shepherd of the people. Here we're told of a leader who will care for the Israelites even when they are encroaching on his personal time with his close friends, the disciples.

Jesus takes the time to teach the crowd many things and so provides them with spiritual sustenance which they so desperately needed. I wonder if it was due to their spiritual hunger that the crowd was restless and pursued Jesus and the disciples. We're not told what the crowd was doing as Jesus taught them but they must have continued to be patient and desirous of teaching because it's clear that considerable time passes before the disciples bring Jesus' attention to how late it was getting. Perhaps we can picture this restless crowd coming to Jesus with a mark of lost bewilderment in their eyes and as Jesus starts to teach them there is change in their countenance as they appreciate the spiritual nourishment which they are in need of and this also allows them to relax and find the peace that perhaps they knew they needed but couldn't put their finger on. Here we can see a connection between receiving sustenance and finding rest. Will the disciples also make this connection?

Jesus Gives Rest and Sustenance (vv. 35-44)

As I mentioned, the disciples call to Jesus' attention that it's getting late and he should send the people off to get food. "By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. 'This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'" It's not clear whether the disciples are being thoughtful of the needs of the crowd or whether they're feeling a bit exasperated that they can't have some time by themselves with Jesus. Whatever the case, Jesus takes this as an opportunity for a teachable moment with the disciples. Jesus will help the disciples to see the connection between receiving sustenance or provision and finding rest.

"But [Jesus] answered [the disciples], 'You give them something to eat.'

They said to him, 'That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?'

'How many loaves do you have?' he asked. 'Go and see.'

When they found out, they said, 'Five – and two fish.'"

The disciples wanted to have a rest but Jesus asks them to provide for the people. There is a clearly exasperated tone in the disciples voice when they reply, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" The frustrated tone continues when they inform him of the very meagre supplies which were available, five loaves and two fish.

The situation is similar to when Jesus was asleep in the boat and a large storm arose on the lake and the disciples were frustrated that Jesus wasn't helping to bail water and they didn't realise that they had in their midst the one who could command the wind and the waves. Here the disciples haven't eaten properly and they had wanted to have a rest like they'd been told they should have. The disciples wanted provision and rest and Jesus wouldn't come to the party and send the crowds away and now to make matters worse, he suggested that it was possible for them to provide for the crowd. When would Jesus stop being unreasonable?!

When the disciples have reached the end of themselves Jesus invites them to be involved in providing for the people. Jesus doesn't just tell the disciples to sit down and watch and learn, he wants them actively involved in this process.

Then Jesus told them to make all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Jesus gives thanks that God blesses them with enough and starts the multiplication process but I think the image is that the multiplication of this bread and the fish continued as the disciples distributed it. I wonder how quickly the disciples caught on that this is what was happening? Did they start to tear a piece of the broken bread in half and passed a piece out only to realise that the piece they were holding was still almost the same size?

I think that this is a lesson which Jesus wanted his disciples to keep remembering and that's why the disciples went round and picked up the leftovers in their little lunchbox baskets (the Jewish equivalent of the man-bag), enough for each of the twelve.

The disciples would be stressed about supplies and provision until they realised that Jesus was with them and Jesus was always more than enough to provide for them and for everyone who came to him. As the disciple realised that Jesus was the ultimate source of provision, so they would also be able to find rest.

Conclusion

Charles Shultz, the writer of Peanuts was a strong Christian but he wasn't afraid to poke fun at Christians traditions and sayings at times. One of Shultz's cartoons has Charlie Brown holding up a banner saying, "Jesus is the answers," and in the next slide Snoopy is walking along with a banner asking, "What is the question?" There are

indeed times when Christians too flippantly say, “Jesus is the answer.” However, on this occasion Jesus really is the answer. The disciples didn’t have time to eat and so really needed both provision as well as rest. Likewise the crowd were unsettled, lost without a shepherd, and they needed spiritual provision which would ease their restlessness and later they needed physical provision too. The disciples didn’t have sufficient provision to supply everyone’s needs and indicated an agitation which shows that they were likewise in need of rest. We see in this story an interesting interconnection between the need for rest and the need for provision and the answer to these needs is Jesus. Yes, Jesus is the answer, but not in some flippant way which reeks of pious sentimentality but in a concrete and practical way.

Jesus is still the answer for us today and particularly as we face needs of rest and sustenance. We’re about to have a reflective song where we acknowledge that Jesus is more than a friend. During this song may I suggest you take the time to share with Jesus what he already knows, those concerns you have that make you uneasy or even restless to the point of having a knot in your stomach. Then, as we move from the song into a time of prayer ask the Lord to provide you with what you truly need, the sustenance that he is more than capable of giving.

[Song: Jesus Is More Than A Friend]