Rest and Reset

A sermon written by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

July 21, 2024 ~ Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I’d like to begin with a reflection written in honor of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador during that country’s Civil War in the 1970’s. Initially welcomed as part of the establishment, he became an outspoken advocate for the poor and a critic of the military; he preached a Gospel of liberation. Romero was shot and killed at the altar while celebrating the Eucharist. The Church recognizes him as a martyr and saint. Now, these words (Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw):

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent  
enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom

always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.

Many times through the years I have turned to these words for a needed reset in my perspective. When I feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge, I take comfort in returning to the one small thing that I can do, tending the seeds and soil within my reach.

We find ourselves in the midst of upheaval and change. The stakes for our planet, our nation, our community… the stakes are high. We have dreams of the world as it might be, could be, should be. Perhaps we are finding ways to use the gifts we have, the life we are living, to make a difference in some small way, for good.

God’s call to the prophet Jeremiah was succinct: “I appoint you over nations..., to pluck up and to pull down..., to build and to plant.” In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ call and his ministry move on two similar trajectories, one subversive, even combative; the other, constructive, generative. In one moment, Jesus upsets the structures of family and synagogue, challenges authority, overturns tables and systems, casts out demons. In the next, Jesus feeds the hungry, heals the infirm, blesses the poor, teaches the way of love, has compassion for all who seek help.

Time and again, in the midst of these campaigns, both plucking up and planting, Jesus takes some time, alone or with his disciples, to step aside, to go apart, to go to a place alone, to regroup, to reset, to pray, to rest.

Our readings this morning invite us into this time of sabbath with the living, loving God. You will note that the passage we heard is cut and paste; it’s the verses in between. Jesus has been hard at it in chapter six – rejected from his home synagogue, learned about the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist, walked on water, and fed the five thousand. Demanding schedule, being the Messiah, bringing about the kin-dom of God.

In between all that. Let’s listen once again. Jesus had sent the disciples out in pairs to teach and to heal. They now return. With stories, tales of their adventures. Jesus proposes they seek a break from the crowds; “come away to a deserted place, all by yourselves, rest a while.” They get into a boat to sail to a different shore. The Sea of Galilee – known too as the Sea of Gennesaret or the Lake of Galilee – is a large body of water but one can see all the way across it. The crowds saw Jesus and his disciples set off and ran ahead; they were there ahead of them.

When Jesus and the disciples came ashore, Jesus saw the crowds. He had compassion on them, for they were as sheep without a shepherd. What did he see, with the eyes and heart of God? This crowd. Their deep longings and thirst. Their weariness and struggle. Their unresolved challenges and wounded relationships. What do we see in one another? First, we likely see the put-together, competent, outward facing person, we present for public life. Do we, can we, see a bit deeper, to some of the truth within, the child within. Not all hard, not all struggle. There is joy, delight, tenderness, conviction. Jesus met them with love.

While there, the crowds kept coming. Word was out. From the villages, farms, market places; from the cities and the byways they came. All who were sick, or distressed, or in need; they all came. To draw near, to be in the presence of the Christ, to touch even the fringe of his cloak, for all who touched it were healed.

Where, now, may Jesus be found? On what shore? Where do we, might we, seek and find the healing touch that we long for? Where or to whom shall we turn to receive the blessing of a smile of recognition, an embrace, of love?

Time and again, in the midst of the campaign, Jesus takes the disciples to a quiet place, to pray, to be restored. And, there, to recommit, reset, to return, for them to embody the love of God themselves. To bring healing and mercy to a world in great need.

Come apart with me now. I will read a poem, familiar perhaps to some of you. We have time, I believe, for me to read it through twice, with a pause in between. Before we return once more to the world and its need. First, I invite you to close your eyes and take five deep breaths.

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention,

how to fall down into the grass,

how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed,

how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

*The Summer Day*, by Mary Oliver