

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Each week as I begin to think about what the Holy Spirit is calling me to say to you from this pulpit, I pull out the sermons I've already preached on the passages of the day. Now before you start thinking that I'm recycling sermons, let me clarify that I've never preached to you the exact same sermon you heard me preach before. But I do find it helpful and interesting to remember what my focus was in years past, and I've also found that those old sermons often remind me of a little piece of our collective history.

For example, six years ago I commented on the actions of the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, held in July, 2009. The big news from that convention was its decision to open up the ordination discernment process to homosexuals and transgendered persons, news that was celebrated by some members of our churches and mourned by others. Lots has changed in the world since then, and we've moved beyond approving ordination for gays and lesbians to assuring them of the same and equal rights as heterosexuals, most recently the approval of marriage for them both in our church and under the laws of our country. Despite the appearance of change, it is a subject which still causes division among us. We've learned who we can or cannot share our feelings with and we just don't talk about it unless we feel safe with those around us or unless we share on social media, where we have a feeling of anonymity whether that's the case or not. But with folks we see face to face, we don't want to make waves, we don't want to create ill will, and we don't want to risk being called out for our opinions.

On the Friday before we heard these lessons three years ago, we were all shocked to learn of the movie theater shootings in Aurora, Colorado. Interestingly, the first phase of the trial for the defendant in that case has just been completed. But again, there's more to add to the story. Just this week, we heard about the shootings in Chattanooga, and in between there have been many other occasions for folks to disagree about the cause of these horrific and violent incidents. Was it a lack of gun control, or should someone have been paying closer attention to what this young man was doing? We don't always agree—in fact, we often disagree! But we approach our disagreements about this subject in the same way we handle our disagreements about sexuality. For many of us it somehow seems safer to just keep quiet than to risk upsetting our fragile co-existence.

We can look back at the history of God's people and recognize that despite all the changes to our world, things haven't really changed. Today's passage from Jeremiah shows us God's fury and sadness about the corruption of the kings of Judah who failed to protect and nurture God's people. God promises to raise up a righteous Branch, who shall reign as king and deal wisely, and execute justice and righteousness. Yet when he comes, our Lord Christ finds that the human condition is much the same as it was in Jeremiah's day, and that his new way of being and doing God's work is not universally welcome. When he comes again, he will likely find still similar circumstances. Surely that is why he called the twelve disciples to serve with him, and then to go into the world to make disciples of all nations—which is how we came to be here in St. Francis Church on this Sunday morning in July of 2015.

Today we get a glimpse of why that is so important. The disciples have just returned from their first solo ministry efforts and they gather around Jesus to tell him all they have done and taught. Can you imagine what that conversation was like? Remember this is a close-knit bunch of fellows, surely sharing both their triumphs and their disappointments. "Here's what worked really well, Jesus; and here's what didn't." They were likely both exhilarated and exhausted. So in the manner of his own practice, Jesus says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Scripture tells us that time away has been important since God created the earth. God wanted rest; and likewise, every human being, regardless of the type of work we engage in, needs a break. I'm not talking about the six or eight or however many hours of sleep we get each night. I'm not talking about vacation or just a change of venue. This is a break from the routine; a time to slow down, to listen to our hearts and our spirits and the voice of God that dwells within us. That's what Jesus did—and as scripture tells us, he did it often. He sought those times when he could regain his energy and his enthusiasm for the ministry that was his work; times that would help him maintain his perspective about his role in the lives of the people to whom he ministered.

If the first lesson for us in today's passage is about our need to get away, the second is surely about the way that we perceive and relate to one another. That time away to which Jesus called his disciples was short-lived because the people had great need of Jesus and his friends and the comfort and courage to be gained from time with them. The gospel says that Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." They needed his love and wisdom and gentle guidance. So he taught them when he was weary, he healed them when he wanted to be alone, and he fed them when he himself was hungry. I can only guess that it was his divinity that gave him the ability and endurance to do those things, and I'm pretty sure that for the rest of us, it's imperative to find the balance between ministry and retreat, between work and rest.

I'll confess to you something that you probably already know: I have a particularly hard time finding the balance between being an effective minister of Christ to others and caring for myself; and usually I don't even realize it until things are so far out of whack that I've said something I shouldn't have said or haven't done something I should have done. Surely I'm not the only one who struggles with this! What are the signals that your own wellbeing has become imbalanced? How do you restore the balance of your life and your spirit? How do we as a community of faith enable you to do that? And if we don't, how can we change it?

This week I traveled to a lake in southeastern Alabama to share two and a half days with seminary classmates who have become my closest friends since we began studying together at Sewanee. This annual "retreat" has become an important part of our lives in ministry, so important that we work hard to schedule it at a time when all of us can be there and we miss it only when there is an emergency in our parish or our personal lives. It doesn't take the form of any other retreat I've ever known about. We don't study the bible and we don't maintain moments of silence; in fact, someone is always talking and the rest of us are listening attentively. We share the same things with each other that I imagine Jesus and his disciples shared in their times together, both personal and professional: our triumphs, our disappointments, our ideas and plans, our hopes and our dreams. And although our time together is short and infrequent, each of us comes away with clarity about our purpose and perspective. That is, after all, what a retreat is meant to accomplish: to give us the will and the way to be Christ's hands and feet in the world around us.

The same human conditions that exist in our world today have existed for thousands of years before today. They don't seem to be getting better. As a church, we are called to be both a place of retreat and safety, and a place where our conversations and our love for God and our fellow human beings calls us to take action, to show compassion to those who most need it, ministering to them just as Jesus and his disciples ministered to the desperate folk of their own day. We cannot do that well unless we surrender ourselves to God's will, remaining aware of God's presence, and acknowledging and acting on both those occasions when God is calling us to be nurtured and those when God is calling us to be nurturer, so that those who meet us will meet Christ and know him through us.
Amen.