



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, July 22, 2018

*The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

FR. CHARLES WITKE

Jeremiah 23:1-6 | Psalm 23 | Ephesians 2:11-22 | Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” These words of Jesus to his apostles from Mark’s Gospel this morning can resonate with us in so many ways. Who among us at one time or another has not found things just too much, and a chance to get away all by oneself and get some rest exactly what one yearns for? Of course, the context of the Gospel passage is totally different from our life situation. Or is it? Jesus has sent the apostles out and away from him to begin their work, and now they have returned to tell him all they have done and taught. Jesus perceives that they are exhausted, and makes this suggestion of strategic retreat and regrouping and renewal.

Often in our lives too, in our families, and in our work places, or even just on our own, things seem to be getting too much for us, too much coming and going, and maybe too, as the Gospel puts it, no leisure even to eat: or at least to have a leisurely meal. And then the idea of retreat, of shutting it all down and going away by oneself to that deserted place, becomes irresistible. And of course the deserted place needn’t be a hot island or a remote camp site, but can just be a place where there are no demands, nothing but the rest one craves.

The apostles buy into Jesus’ suggestion to get away from it all, but it doesn’t work out the way they all hoped. They are recognized as they slip away to their much-yearned for resting place, the crowds follow them, overtake them, and are on hand in droves when what they hoped was their apostolic cruise boat docks. The deserted place turns out to be full of needy people all claiming their attention and energies. It is rather like what I once heard a clergyman relate, about finally getting a vacation and flying to Hawaii only to be seated next to a person who, perceiving a seat-mate professionally programmed to listen and support, told him the story of his life, needs, frustrations and many hostile animosities across the endless Pacific. It wasn’t supposed to turn out that way.

And it wasn’t supposed to turn out that way for the apostles and Jesus, either. We see what happens: Jesus has compassion on all those waiting for them, because they were like

sheep without a shepherd. Sheep are rather stupid animals, and need all the help they can get. So do people, which is why Jesus in this Gospel taught them many things. Did the apostles start to take naps? We are not told. In this Gospel narrative, Jesus has the expected compassion on the crowds, and also on the exhausted apostles working with him.

Our belief, of whatever sort, asks us to do certain things, as well as to believe certain things. And that is the way God created us: to find meaning and value in who we are and the work we do: perhaps especially if it is in some way of service to God and of benefit to our neighbors, particularly those in need. But we can’t be persistently busy, as if everything depends on us alone. Weariness and tedium will surely overtake the most dedicated and even the strongest. So many of us, maybe all of us once in a while, are victims of these failed illusions of being in control of our lives, our achievements, our goals. And if we have a bad case of another human desire to see ourselves as working to make ourselves right with God, we begin to think all our doings and actions and even beliefs can accomplish this. Illusions like these need constant propping up; so we keep very busy doing many valuable things, but fail to heed what Jesus told his apostles when they had related to him all the great things they had done, and all the valuable teaching: “Come away to a deserted place, retreat from all your activity, and rest a while.” I’ve often wondered why a deserted place is specified: perhaps so that they can’t start telling people all they have done?

Were the apostles pushing themselves in their all-important work? Did they think it all depended on them? Anyway, Jesus graciously looks past all their possible illusions along this line, illusions we often also entertain. He doesn’t even mention them. If he did, he would have to remind us that any abilities we have to accomplish anything at all, are gifts from God in the first place. Instead he asks them to do something very different: to find time and devote that time to being rather than to doing. That way, they will be better fit to attend to the needs of the crowds that had gathered on

the shore to meet them: the never-ending assembly of sheep without a shepherd.

The pace did not slacken for them nor will it for us. The needs of the world and its people never end. The temptation in the face of such need is to do something big and brave, something difficult we can encounter and overcome. Instead we hear the Gospel's words, "Come away and rest a while," and we too should pay closer attention to them. Such a strategic withdrawal is to take a step back so you can take a big jump forward into the work that awaits every day. And maybe the little things we can do are as important as the big things. You never know. If we are too distracted and daunted by the world's overwhelming needs, it is exactly as if we are too distracted by the world's values. We lose sight of our shepherd, and we are lost too.