

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

July 18, 2021

Pentecost 8

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Rev. Prema Samuel
Assistant to the Bishop, Synod of Alberta and the Territories

We are exhausted.

As I am preparing this sermon, I am hot and sticky and tired. It is 34 degrees and I have a whole week of this ahead. How I feel this dry, hot day reflects how I have felt the past number of months.

I turn to Facebook for some escape. I usually enjoy pictures of people's camping trips and flower gardens, beautiful baby pictures and family events. But populated throughout social media are stories of the great injustices – injustices perpetrated on our Muslim brothers and sisters... the horrors of the residential schools. These issues, along with concerns of climate change and gender equality, are of immense importance. But for just a few blessed minutes I want to find an escape from all that needs to be done, to be challenged, voiced — to find peace. Quickly enough, that quest for positivity becomes swallowed up by the darkness I was hoping to avoid for a few, precious minutes.

When I check out the news feeds from my family and friends in India, I find the same thing waiting for me. The grim realities of COVID, as my country of birth faces levels of death and trauma due to the virus which some have referred to as a genocidal in nature. Of course, that does not even take into consideration the migrant workers seeking work or refuge, amidst the numerous atrocities towards women and young children, students and so on. I feel helpless, knowing I am half a world away and can do nothing to help. All I can do is pray and hope that God will see my family and my country through this horrible time, and I worry.

The COVID realities here in Canada are fraught with uncertainty. The province I am currently living in is set to open on July 1st and many await it with anxiety. Yes, it will be nice to see everyone again and do the many things we have put on hold, but there is always the worry that this might precipitate another wave. We do not want to go through anymore lockdowns, but we certainly don't want to see any more loss of life either.

Needless to say, I am exhausted, deep in my bones and soul and I know that I echo a sentiment shared by many. I am exhausted!

In our Gospel reading, Mark tells of the disciples returning to Jesus from their missionary work, excited by all that they have done and taught. It reminds me of the day when my grade 1 child returned from a hot field trip day at the Zoo. He was so excited to tell all me about all that he saw and did at the Zoo, that he did not give any thought to the heat of the day and that he had been walking through most of it and possibly very tired. As a mother, my first thought was, "did you eat your lunch, did you drink enough water throughout the day?" – to ensure that he was well and cared for.

Responding to them, Jesus recognizes that and offers the disciples the invitation for rest and nourishment. They are invited to eat and rest, knowing that soon enough they will need to return to world. But right now, rest is far more important. Without it, they will not be able to do what they have been called to do.

How many times, over the last many months, have you rested? And when I say rested, I mean truly rested. A soul rest that leaves you nourished and feeling alive. The soul rest that is so needed after the soul work, the Spirit's work that comes from passion and love for the speaking and doing – proclaiming the Gospel.

This soul rest has certainly been a challenging one for me through this time of COVID. Along with negotiating the world we live in, to negotiate education and care for my family, ensure the call I have been invited to serve is... to worry about loved ones' health and well-being. Not even to mention the exhaustion from weeping for and with our Indigenous siblings, speaking for climate justice, challenging discrimination against persons of color and disabilities, against the many oppressions and injustices... This is soul work and it is exhausting! And needs the soul nourishment and soul rest.

There isn't time for soul rests and taking the kind of nourishment that brings fullness to the soul. I am sure that like me, you have to make do with little dribblets of rest, most of which feel like cat naps when what we need is a long, real soul rest.

When Jesus offers his disciples rest, there is a part of me that wants to call out, "Me too. Please. I need that food and rest too!" It sounds so wonderful, to rest in the presence of Jesus.

Perhaps that sentiment was shared by others outside of the disciples. Because, as they rest, others, many others, come to Jesus. They are seeking something. Perhaps it is healing or wholeness or perhaps just standing in the presence of Jesus. Jesus, seeing them, goes to them because he has compassion on them. As the disciples rest, Jesus continues the soul work of teaching and healing. Many, like the Syrophenician woman from the June 27th reading, are content just reaching out to touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak. In that moment, they find the rest, the love and the wholeness that they need. We don't know what kind of life they were facing, but it was likely not easy. The Romans and the Judean elites would have made life difficult for them. But in Jesus, they had found life and it was enough just to touch the fringe of his cloak. It was enough for them to find the healing they needed so that they could keep moving and keep living.

In this moment of our history, we need the rest in Jesus. We echo the needs of the disciples and those that came running and those that were brought to Jesus. Whether we were trying to help negotiate the church through this unprecedented time or whether we were just trying to hold on, our very being cries out for relief and for hope. We are crying out for our God. And as Christ does, he comes to us in compassion and offers us that peace, that rest. Christ gathers us in and bids us to rest, to put down our burdens and let go.

That is not to say that we are no longer needed in the world. Soon enough, we will need to set off once again and be agents of Christ's love in the world. But we also need to rest and find nourishment and succor for our souls. We need to find that healing and peace that only Christ can give, or we risk being taken down by the cares of the world.

And mind you, as he did that day... while the disciples rested, Christ continued to heal, teach, nourish and care.

In our need, Christ comes and offers us food and rest knowing that we will have to go back out into the world. As we rest Christ continues the healing and teaching. We rest in Christ to be strengthened to get back to where Christ is to speak, challenge, heal, teach, nurture and nourish in compassion – to go and do the soul work. We are needed to be the hands, heart, ears, voice, eyes of Christ. But for now, knowing Christ continues the work of compassion, we are invited to rest, to rejuvenate, to renew. We will go out with renewed strength to clearly see and do, with refreshed heart to passionately love and challenge, with revived hope to heal and forgive. But he won't let us do that so exhausted that we cannot even function. Instead, he will grant us peace, restore our hope and help us to see again that we are valued and loved always so that in turn, we can value and love God's children.

To this God who, in challenging and calling us to be the missionaries of justice, healing and peace, invites and reminds us of the peace, healing and rest bringing wholeness, we say, "Amen and thanks be to God."