

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” That has got to be my favorite verse from our readings this morning. I am so glad to hear Jesus say that as I prepare for my own vacation starting on Tuesday. That could be the Bible verse for our whole trip. “Come away ... all by yourselves and rest a while.” Just like Jesus and the disciples, Helen, Marian, and I are crossing the sea for our time of rest, relaxation, and “getting away from it all.” Though not to a deserted place. We’re headed to England to help Helen’s sister celebrate her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and we’ve got a little side trip planned up to Scotland, where none of us has ever been, even though Helen’s hometown is scarcely 200 miles from the border, and even though this will be, if I counted right, my 17<sup>th</sup> trip to the UK. I’m looking forward to some sightseeing, some non-work-related reading for pleasure, some good English beer, a wee bit of Scotch whiskey, and, of all things, bacon sandwiches. English bacon sandwiches are simple pleasure that you just can’t get here without extraordinary effort because not only is English bacon different from ours, but so is their bread. And then, before I know it those three weeks will fly by and I’ll be back in the saddle again, working to get us geared up for the start of the new program year.

Thinking about our own vacations, as I have just done, can help us to start to get at what is going on in our Gospel reading this morning, but it’s really only a start. I want to briefly highlight three things in this passage that Jesus cares about, and that will help us to think about the bigger picture of what God is up to in Jesus and what it has to do with us. First, Jesus cares about our personal wellbeing. Second, Jesus cares about politics and public life, and third, Jesus cares about both sides of our borders.

Jesus cares about our personal wellbeing. He wants us to take care of ourselves and to have some down time from our work. This concern, of course, goes back to the very beginning, to the creation stories. In the first creation story we are told that after six days of creation God spent the seventh day resting. If resting is good enough for God, it’s good enough for God’s people, and they should take at least one day a week to rest from their work. In our Gospel reading, Jesus’ disciples have just returned from a mission to the towns and villages of Galilee, where they proclaimed the message of repentance and the coming kingdom of God, and healed the sick. Jesus knows that that had been hard work, and probably stressful as well, and so he invites them on a retreat – a vacation, if you will, to get some rest. And Jesus himself often withdrew from the public, and even his disciples, to spend time alone, in prayer. Recent studies that I ran across in just the last week or two are suggesting that not one, not two, but *four* days off each week might result in optimal performance at work, especially if you are over 40. Hospitals have been doing this for a while now. Our son James just started working in the Emergency Department at Carle, and his normal schedule is three 12-hour shifts per week. So he has four days off, but really long days when he’s on. The point here is that self care is important, both for our own sake, and for the sake of the work that we are called to do. It’s not unlike the instructions they give you on airplanes. If the oxygen masks drop down, first put yours on before helping anyone else. Take care of yourself, in other words, so that you will then be able to take care of others.

And that leads nicely into to the next point: Jesus cares not only about our personal wellbeing, he also cares about our politics and our public life. You might be thinking that that is a stretch, that there’s nothing here about politics. Your skepticism is noted, and I will give you a

pass on this one because of our history of individualizing and sentimentalizing the shepherd imagery in the Bible. Mark saying that Jesus saw the crowds as sheep without a shepherd is precisely about politics, and a direct reference to our first reading from Jeremiah. But shepherding imagery in the Bible is always a reference to kings and kingship. In the prophets of the Old Testament it's about the kings of Israel and Judah. In the New Testament, it's about the kingdom of God and Jesus as the Messiah. On the fourth Sunday of Easter every year we observe Good Shepherd Sunday with a reading from John chapter 10, the Good Shepherd chapter. You could say that to day, then, is Bad Shepherd Sunday. Jeremiah lays into the kings of Israel and Judah for not caring for the people they rule over. Jesus sees the desperate crowds whose rulers have let them down. And this follows immediately upon last Sunday's text about Herod killing John the Baptist, more concerned about his own personal interests than the interest of his people. We don't have kings any more. We have politics. We have presidents and legislators, governors and mayors. But whatever we call it, and however we structure it, God cares about our public life. God cares about how we conduct our public affairs and how it affects people's lives. God cares about how we treat the hungry and the sick, the homeless and the poor. I'll let you judge for yourselves how we measure up these days, whether our leaders and our voters are attending to the common good, or whether they care more about their own interests and enrichment at the expense of others. Just remember, that in this system you are one of the rulers, in theory at least.

So God care about our personal wellbeing, God cares about our public wellbeing, and third, God cares about both sides of our borders. Jesus in Mark's Gospel is God's anointed one, the Good Shepherd, the one who will reestablish God's reign. To his own people that meant that he was coming to make Israel great again and take revenge on their enemies. And yet Jesus lived and conducted his mission on the border. He interacted not only with his own people, but with foreigners as well. In the first half of Mark's Gospel, Jesus travels back and forth across the Sea of Galilee numerous times, just as he does in our reading today. And across the Sea of Galilee is Gentile territory. He is constantly crossing the borders, to the east, to the north, and to the south. And he continually finds faith in the foreigners he meets, even as his own people are rejecting him and his mission. Our reading this morning skips over Mark's account of the feeding of the five thousand. We're going to get that next week from the Gospel of John. The reading that we skip takes place in Galilee, in Jewish territory. But later in the Gospel, Jesus will feed four thousand people in a similar way. Only it will be on the other side, in Gentile territory. Mark is signaling that Jesus is not about bringing back the good old days that never were. He is rather about uniting all people under God's benevolent and generous reign. It turns out that Gentile lives matter to God just as much as Jewish lives.

What do we do with all of this? How do we put it all together? There is a well-known tension in the church between caring for the personal faith lives of individuals and being involved in social justice for the sake of society as a whole, with more so-called conservatives favoring the former and more so-called progressives favoring the latter. Today's readings help us to see that this is a false dichotomy, that God cares about both personal faith and social justice, and that the one should lead to the other. God came into the world in Jesus Christ on mission to reconcile and redeem our whole selves, both public and private — and all peoples, not just our particular tribe. His death and resurrection make this possible. They both model and enable a life that is uncurled from selfishness and tribalism, a life that both clings to God in faith and trust, and reaches out to others in love and kindness. May we be open to the full spectrum of the life that God intends for us, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.