

Title: The Hungry Soul  
Text: Mark 6: 30 – 34, 53 – 56  
Date: July 22, 2018

So we find ourselves smack in the middle of summer, with many people away on extended vacations. Is this why we hear Jesus say, **“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”**? Is the message here, “Give yourselves a break, people. Everyone needs some rest sometimes, and that’s OK. Don’t feel guilty. That’s just the way we are wired. Go to the lake. Go to the beach. Go see the grandkids. Enjoy!”

While that does go down smoothly, I think there might be something a little deeper for us to ponder.

We would be well-served to be aware of the broader context of our passage. In verses 6 – 13 of this chapter Jesus had sent the disciples out two by two to take their new spiritual authority for a test drive. They **“proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”** In the text that we read earlier the disciples are now returning to Jesus for a debriefing of sorts. They talked and talked and talked about all their experiences. They were hyped. They were exhausted. This, then, is the context where Jesus says, **“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”** I think many of us can relate; especially those highly invested in the ministry of this church.

Cláudio Carvalhaes, a native Brazilian, is a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He has intriguing titles out such as “Eucharist and Globalization” and “Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives.” Thinking of the politically and socially charged environment in which we find ourselves, I hear his warning that, **“we can also fall into the trap of working hard for the cause of justice without attending to our souls and our spiritual and emotional needs. . . . In the desert, we recover our hearts back again from our cellphones, our rushed lives. The desert is not a thing in itself but a corridor that functions as a way in and out of our constant work for justice.”**

On a similar vein, we have the words of Diana Rodriguez who writes, **“We are called to seek justice, not to burn out seeking it. I am not going to fix the world by myself. I have to realize the fact that sometimes I try to do too much and end up doing nothing. . . . We must work to sustain the rhythm God has built into life. God worked and rested. We must do the same. Jesus taught and healed, then retreated.”**

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OK. I’d like to pull back for a bit and look at this now from an entirely different perspective. Something other than tending to the soul of the weary worker striving to usher in the reign of God.

We read that Jesus had compassion on this motley crew following him who seemed like sheep without a shepherd. We read that the sick were coming to him – or being brought to him – from throughout the region. These were the people that were rushing to him - that would not leave him alone. This makes a great read, but surely not the kind of environment that many would feel comfortable in.

So we have wondered about identifying with the worn-out disciples. Could we possibly identify with sick masses that came after him like a scene from the Night of The Living Dead? Looking out at the congregation this morning, this notion might seem like something of a

stretch. You all seem clean, well-dressed, well-spoken, and composed. Surely you don't want to be a bother to anyone.

Yet I wonder. I've been here all of 10 months, and when I force myself to think about it, I have heard many a heart-breaking story – many a story where you too might in some sense beg to touch “the fringe of Jesus' cloak” – many a story where you too might have felt like a sheep without a shepherd. You might have felt alone, as though you were off in a deserted place.

One of you told me a story of investing a sizeable sum of money with someone you thought you could trust, only to be swindled. I've heard of people losing their spouse through long, protracted illnesses. I've heard of people losing their spouse suddenly, and without warning. I have heard stories of people dealing with mental illness in their family for years and years. I have heard of difficult surgeries that didn't work as planned. Many of you have grappled with cancer. I have heard difficult stories of people feeling inherently unwelcomed by society. I have heard of couples ready to enjoy their “golden years,” only to be surprised by heartbreak or tragedy amongst their children or grandchildren; whether it be through broken relationships, abusive partners, suicide, prison, car accidents, or congenital health issues. The list could go on. You are a sharp, articulate lot, yet I cannot pretend that the pain that many of you carry is not real. For many, the longing to feel Jesus' touch may well be palpable. You likely know what it feels like to be alone in a deserted place.

Deserted places are critical places. They are not always comfortable, although here in Mark Jesus *seems* to imply that they are. But that would be a grand misreading of Jesus' words.

It might be good to be reminded that Jesus began his ministry in a deserted place. In the very first chapter we read that after Jesus began his ministry, he “**could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country – in the deserted places - and people came to him from every quarter.**” (1:45) Where Mark begins matters significantly: in the wilderness - in a deserted place. And we forget that at our peril. And now it seems it's about time the disciples remember how this whole thing started, and I suspect that is true for us gathered here as well. Because a deserted place is where the Gospel belongs, and where the Gospel can be heard once again.

What are those deserted places that make you see, make you hear, make you realize what you didn't realize before? On what, or whom, can you rely? The sparseness of Mark's version of the temptation in the wilderness speaks about such places. All we know is that Jesus was possessed by the Spirit after his baptism, sent out into the wilderness, and that the angels ministered to him. Maybe that's the point. Deserted places change your perspective. You see only what's left, what's essential. You realize who is left, standing by your side.

The deserted places are often the places we avoid, and yet we know somewhere deep down they are necessary places, truthful places. They are *not* just “time to get away” places. They are not just “we all need a break” places. These are places that force us to recognize what's necessary. What's absolutely needed. And *who* will truly be there when everyone else walks away. And so Jesus takes his disciples to a deserted place *not* for a well-deserved respite, but to teach them what he learned in the wilderness - and what will be essential for them to remember when it comes to their role in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

When we go through our own time of trial, things drop away that are not essential. Now I might be terribly keen to learn of the outcome of the Mueller investigation, but should I be on my deathbed, that will hardly seem to matter to me. Sometimes we are involved in groups or activities that have long lost their purpose and usefulness. When we are going through our own trials – and feel that we are in a deserted place – that is often when we discern what really matters.

Elizabeth O'Connor writes, "Perhaps if we kept more fully our desert watches—stayed longer where the pain is—we would be different when we left the wilderness. As it is, we often have learned very little and so are destined to suffer in the same ways again." (in *Our Many Selves*)

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes, "The wilderness is not just a desert through which we wandered for forty years. It is a way of being. A place that demands being open to the flow of life around you. A place that demands being honest with yourself without regard to the cost in personal anxiety. A place that demands being present with all of yourself." In other words, while we might learn from deserted places in times of trial, there is also an invitation for us to learn of being in deserted places as they are incorporated into our normal spiritual pilgrimage.

In our life together as a community of faith, some might be crusaders for justice who need a reminder to incorporate time in the desert into their spiritual practice. These practices become important because our presence and work as Christians in the world are fundamental to the lives of those who are the least of these. Others might be going through their own times of trials where all but that which is most vital will be dropping away.

Both will need to learn from their time in the desert. And please be aware that from time to time the roles will be reversed, and the person who was once the crusader will now be struggling for dear life to rediscover – to reconnect with – that which is most elemental. And what is that?

Wherever you find yourself on the ebb and flow just described, may you learn to hear again in pure tones the Voice that says, "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." Thank God for the desert where all things come into focus.

Amen.

#### Mark 6: 30 – 34, 53 – 56

<sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup>As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

<sup>53</sup>When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. <sup>54</sup>When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, <sup>55</sup>and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup>And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.