

Epiphany 5-B
Feb. 4, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

A few years ago I spent an intense day reading Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "Leaving Church" from cover to cover. It had been a long time since I had devoured a book in one day (kind of a guilty pleasure). Taylor, some of you know, is an Episcopal priest who once was named as one of the best preachers in the world. People flocked to hear her preach and she was preaching, pastoring and writing most of the time.

Her ordained ministry began as an associate in a large church in Atlanta, where she was drawn into caring for many in a full and busy job. One of the things that prompted her to move from that large church to a rural area and a smaller church was the intensity of her work – the great sense of need that surrounded her. She called what was happening to her "compassion fatigue." There just wasn't enough of her to go around. She and her husband moved to the country to, she said, to 'find her soul again.'

But it didn't quite work out the way she had hoped and planned. She found herself in the same hectic, demanding schedule that she had known in the city – a job that never seemed to be done. She wrote, "I had once again become so busy caring for the household of God that I neglected the One who had called me there..." Feeding the needs of others, she said, had become her food. It was not working well.

After a little more than five years at that church she left to shift her ministry to something else – college teaching. So she didn't leave the church as much as she left parish ministry. She had to do that in order to find some Sabbath rest.

I have little doubt that my devouring that book in one day had to do with a kind of workaholic nature that I share with people like Barbara Brown Taylor. But that's not why I'm mentioning it today. There is a little piece of today's gospel that awakened this memory and this experience. The bulk and most of the substance of this gospel story is about a healing – and the urgent call to spread the good news that is so much a part of the readings for this season. But there is one bit of the story that we might almost miss if we weren't looking for it.

We pick up the story where we left off last week when Jesus was in the synagogue at Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee preaching, teaching and healing. He went right from the synagogue to the house of Simon and Andrew where he healed Simon's mother in law who had a fever. It must have been a very successful and dramatic healing because we're told that she got right up and started serving them. It was so profound that some biblical scholars believe this healing as described by Mark is a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection.

News got around town fast of this healing and by evening crowds were at the door bringing the sick to him to be healed. You can imagine what that must have been like – a line that probably went out the door and around the house. It was a long day. How could Jesus recharge after that?

Mark tells us that Jesus got up early the next morning – before the sun was up – found a deserted place and prayed. He knew he needed to do that. He knew he could not lose a connection with the one who had called him to this ministry – God, his father. He had to put himself in God's presence without interruption, without complications.

But -- Oops! There was a complication. When Jesus wasn't in the house, Simon and the others started looking for him and eventually found him. "Everyone is searching for you," they said. (I'd almost expect some teaching here on the need for prayer, but that's now how Mark tells the story. Instead, they push on into the next town as they moved through Galilee.) The urgency of the work they were to do spreading the good news took precedence.

There's an old cartoon that pops up from time to time that shows a pastor on his knees praying in his office. His secretary comes into the office and says, "Oh, good. You're not doing anything." And that's often the perception. If you are praying - or taking a quiet moment with God (whether you're a pastor or a mom or a business owner or a carpenter) the perception is often that you aren't doing anything - or worse yet, wasting time.

When I served on the diocesan staff, we had a conversation about changing the greeting on our voice mail to let callers know that for a few minutes around 9 in the morning, the staff was praying together. Sometimes callers find it annoying when the phone isn't answered right away. How do you tell the public that you've decided to waste a little time with God on company time, even when you work for the Church?

The kind of 'busy-ness' that pervades life is a sign of our times. Even when we have discretionary time, there is pressure to be productive. Clean the kitchen. Sort the laundry. Change the oil in the car. Clip coupons out of the Sunday paper. It takes some real discipline sometimes to give ourselves permission to sit still and spend some time with God.

Ronald Rolheiser in his book, “The Holy Longing,” says our age is almost like a conspiracy against the interior life. He really doesn’t develop a conspiracy theory, but lists three reasons why this has become so difficult.

One is that we sometimes are just preoccupied with ourselves – our needs, our wants. It takes a lot of energy to try to gratify those things. Another is that we are so often focused on work, achievement and the practical concerns of life. Our energy is channeled into being productive and successful. A third reason he calls ‘restlessness’—a greed for experience that looks like trying to cram too much into life. Grab all the gusto, as the old beer commercial said. Neal Postman once suggested that as a culture we are amusing ourselves to death. (Maybe it isn’t fair to be making this comment on Super Bowl Sunday – a football game that seems to go on forever.)

A current sub-set of that busyness or preoccupation is the demand of our devices – our smart phones and tablets. That little gadget that I carry around in my pocket can be either a miracle of instant communication or a first-class distraction. It can take me away from real conversations with real people. (Have you ever seen people texting one another from across the room? Sometimes those people are my grandchildren! Sometimes I have been that person.) My phone can disturb my sleep or lure me back to one more enticing game of Words With Friends any time of the day or night. (Don’t get me wrong. I love my phone. I was without it a couple of days this week and really missed it.)

Late last year professors in business schools in Italy and France required that students give up their smartphones for one full day as part of their courses.

Most of the students, they reported, felt some anxiety as they anticipated that day – and they could choose any day they wished. They simply didn't know what to do with the extra time they would have. Studies in this country discovered that when students gave up their phones for a time they performed poorly on mental tasks while in what they called phone withdrawal.

It isn't just about phones and it certainly isn't just younger people. We all inhabit a world with endless possibility for distraction. Some of it is simply recreational. Some of it, though, can be like an addiction.

The bottom line, though, is that it does take some intentionality to take a deep breath, tune out whatever is going on around us or inside us and spend some time with God where we are fed, centered, realigned, restored. Even Jesus had to escape from the crowds – and even his close friends – on a regular basis to do this. Sometimes, as in today's gospel, he had to get up before sunrise and find a quiet place for a while before he got hunted down and sent back to work.

This is a great challenge in our times. But not a new one. St. Augustine of Hippo, a man of many appetites in his early years, observed in the fourth century, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, o God."

May we be brave enough and wise enough to waste some time with God this week – our God who loves life into us. Our God who holds us close and sends us forth. Our God who assures us we are not alone.