

Pray

Has your zig lost its zag? Demands of work, school or home proving too much? It's summer! Time for a change of routine, for R and R, rest and relaxation, posting that "out of office" email notification, time for enjoying summer weather, maybe get away somewhere, finally.

But what if you can't afford to get away or there are lingering pandemic worries? What if, as much as R and R is fun, it leaves you with a niggling feeling there's something missing? On a scale of 1 for Frazzled to 5, I'm as calm as can be, where would you rate your ability to find real rest, your current state of mind, body and soul?

In a 2019 article in the Harvard Business Review, Sarah Green Carmichael reported that numerous studies by Marianna Virtanen of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and her colleagues (as well as many other studies) have found that chronic overwork and the resulting stress can lead to all sorts of health problems, including impaired sleep, depression, high blood pressure, heavy drinking, diabetes, impaired memory, and heart disease. Carmichael concludes by saying, "Maybe when you combine economic incentives of overwork, authority figures, and deep-seated psychological needs, you produce a cocktail that is simply too intoxicating to overcome."

Is it too strong to overcome? Do we tolerate stress because we are fearful of the alternative, actually looking at what keeps us at night? Is real rest possible?

Henri Nouwen, who was a busy academic, had a seven-month sabbatical leave at Genesee Abbey in New York State. During that time, he wrote about his experiences and the apparent paradoxes in the search for real rest, rest based on two fundamental practices: solitude and silence. He wrote in his Genesee Diary:

"While complaining about too many demands, I felt uneasy when none were made. While fretting about tiring lecture tours, I felt disappointed when there were no invitations. While speaking wistfully about an empty desk, I feared the day when that would come true. In short: while desiring to be alone, I was frightened of being alone. The more I became aware of these paradoxes, the more I had indeed fallen in love with my own compulsions and illusions, and how much I needed to step back and wonder, "Is there a quiet stream underneath my fluctuating affirmations and rejections of my little world? Is there a still point where my life is anchored and from which I can reach out with hope and courage and confidence?"

We live so much of our lives in "an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness," as Thomas Kelly calls it. If only we could slip into a life free of strain and anxiety and hurry, that doesn't involve artificial, addictive and costly substances of escape. If only we could know that steady peace of God, that quiet steam where strain is gone and Christ is victor over the world!

We can know this. Today, this very moment, Jesus is inviting you and me into his rest. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29).

Jean Sophia Pigott's poem captures it well, "Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art; I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart."

If we look a little closer at the Scriptures, we will see something remarkable going on that I hope will encourage us. In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples were ministering to the crowd and were so busy they did not even have time to eat lunch. Finally, he said to the disciples they needed to have a break. "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31) In the Gospel writer's passion to move the story along, the only rest Jesus and the disciples get is in the boat ride from one destination to another. A crowd is waiting for them.

Some break! Just when we think Jesus is anticipating modern therapeutic ideals – taking a good rest after a combination of an exhausting piece of work and sudden bad news – John the Baptist's beheading and, as we heard in last week's sermon, the generational damage, genocidal trauma caused at Indian Residential Schools – it all goes horribly wrong. The short boat trip we hear about in Mark chapter 6 is the only time Jesus and the apostles have to themselves. By the time they get to the shore, everyone else has got there first. How do you find rest in all the busyness?

God places us in the eye of the storm. When all around us is chaos and confusion, deep within we know stability and serenity. In the midst of intense personal struggle, we are still and relaxed, focussed and attentive. This is the fruit of the prayer of rest.

"Rest, rest, rest in God's love. The only work you are required now to do is give your most intense attention to God's still, small voice within," wrote Madame Jeanne Guyon.

Two classical practices come to our aid and help anchor us in rest.

First, solitude. "Solitude," writes Louis Bouyer, "serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities." In experiences of solitude, we gently press into the holy of holies, where we are sifted in the stillness. Painfully, we let go of the vain images of ourselves in charge of everything and everybody. Slowly, we loosen our grip on all projects that seem so significant.

Have you ever noticed the many times Jesus experienced solitude? The haunting words, "in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went to a lonely place" (Mark 1:35) Jesus needed frequent retreat and solitude to do his work. Yet, somehow we think we can function without what he deemed essential.

Solitude can lead to rest when it's focus is on the God who invites to His rest. Where is your place of solitude? Where is your thinking place? In a previous parish where I pastored two churches, when pressures got a bit much, and I was driving between church meetings, I used to pull over to roadside parking area, walk down to Loon Lake, take off my sock and shoes and sit on a rock, feet in the water and do nothing. No agenda, no expectations, no illusions, just water and rock, Jesus and me enjoying the day, putting me in touch with real rest. Where is your place of solitude?

"Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while."

A second time-honoured practice is *silencio*, or the stilling of what the old writers called "creaturely activity." This means not so much a complete silence of words, as a silence of grasping, manipulative

control of people and situations. "It means," in words of Richard J. Foster in his book called *Prayer*, "that we stand firm against our codependency drives to control everyone and fix everything." (pg 100)

As we heard in the first reading from 2 Samuel today, King David could rest in the thought that God was in charge and he was King and could he not build God a temple instead of the tent the ark of the covenant was in? The prophet Nathan affirmed him in this thought. But the next day, Nathan has a message for the King. David will not be the one to build a magnificent temple but God will build David a house, not of stone and wood but establish a lineage, from which will come a new king, even greater than David whose "throne," God says through the prophet Nathan, "will be established forever."

Jesus demonstrated that we was the embodiment of that prophecy. Through Jesus' death and resurrection he showed he is Lord of life and death, of heaven and earth, of stress and calm. Jesus understood the concept of kingship, of leadership and of rest. He taught these things to his followers. He teaches them to us.

A true king offers real rest, rest not just from our enemies and dysfunctional behaviours. Rest is an inner quality that we participate in, give ourselves to, by seeking a place of solitude, resting in alert stillness. When I was researching my sermon and in the course I'm taking this Summer online from Tyndale University, I was reminded that Silence is not absence. Silence is presence. Francois Fenelon wrote, "We must silence ourselves in the deep hush of the whole soul, in the ineffable voice of the heavenly spouse, We must bend the ear, because it is a gentle and delicate voice, only heard by those who no longer hear anything else."

"Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while"

Solitude. How can the disciples be alone, while together, on the boat? They were each in their own solitude, their own personality, their own thoughts, these 12 men with Jesus, as the boat bopped about.

Perhaps they recalled their poet who said, "Be still and know I am God" Psalm 46:10.

Come away. By yourself

Your job is to come away, whatever your personality, introvert or extrovert, hyper, task oriented or free-wheeling dreamer. Breathe in while you say, "Lord Jesus," and as you exhale, say, "have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus' job is to give you rest. Your job is to breathe. Let Him be in charge in that moment, as he truly is, in every moment.

Come away by yourselves to a lonely place.

To a lonely place. Decide where your place will be. Your time and your place. Make that your sanctuary. Maybe have a bible there, a cross, a candle, a glass of water, a box of tissues, a journal and a pen to jot things. But turn off the phone for five minutes. Yes, five minutes if you're starting; the world can live without you for five minutes, if someone else is in charge of the kids for five minutes. This is Mommy time. Or Daddy time.

This is not trendy mindfulness; there are similarities. This is sitting, comfortably, in Christ's presence who loves you to the core of your being, in solitude, in silence we begin to discern the language of the divine, with the Lord of heaven and earth shielding you.

To be in touch with your loneliness, your emotion, your burdens, your vulnerabilities, the demands - and give it, all of it, over to Christ, Christ who carried a heavy, rough-hewn, splinter-producing lumber, ie. the cross on which he was executed, to free you, absolutely free you, from those very demands and let you breathe. So, when this happens to me and I get tired of carrying things and pressing deadlines and grief over loved ones lost whom we didn't get to grieve properly or celebrations we've had to adapt as best we could because of the pandemic, I cry. I let it out. I know I'm a man and it's increasingly ok for men to cry, to seek mental health supports. I think one of the reasons mental health is a growing epidemic for men and women is that we have forgotten precisely these two, simple yet apparently illusive, tools of rest. Solitude we choose to avoid, Silence we're afraid of. Man, we're a mess.

Jesus is right there, right in the mess of it all, the crowd sees them in the boat as they work the oars or adjust the sails or steer the tiller and the crowd runs ahead to the next seaside village to get a close look at the walking spectacle who Jesus and the disciples have become. The disciples know their only time of rest at that time of day is while they were going from point a to b. in transit, resting awhile.

So don't miss that one line in all the frenetic activity (Mark 6:31) "Come away, by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." He is saying it to us.

Here's a suggestion: make a plan this week to give Solitude and Silence a try.

Find a place that is quiet and free from distractions. Let those closest to you know that you are seeking solitude and silence for a few minutes and will be turning off notifications on your phone or turn it right off. Make this place and time your sanctuary.

Don't give up. If it's hard, try it again tomorrow. Do this for a full week. Send me a text, email or call and let me how it went.

Two tools for rest: solitude and silence. Tools that don't cost much. Left to ourselves we get lost.

Sermon in a sentence: the king of King we follow knows how to give real rest.

Don't beat yourself up. Jot down things you need to do, then go back to silence. It's not solitude and silence for its own sake but as a means to draw near to the king, the good shepherd who knows we need the rest. Once rested, to be available for God's good work, in and through us. Practising a rhythm of work and rest, rest and work, based on Jesus' example, you'll rediscover your zig and your zag.

Finally, a simple illustration Richard Foster writes about, to bring these tools, the two practices of solitude and silence together.

The L'Arche community for differently abled people uses an imagine that is helpful: cupping hands lightly in prayer. Imagine I have a wounded bird in my hands. What would happen if I closed my hands completely? Response: The bird will be crushed and die. What would happen if I opened my hands completely? Response: Oh, no, the bird might struggle to fly away, further injuring itself, fall and die.

The right place is like my cupped hand, neither totally open nor totally closed. It is the space where growth can take place.

For us too, the hands of God are cupped lightly. We have enough freedom so that we can stretch and grow but also we have enough protection so that we will not be injured – so that we can be healed. This is the gift solitude and silence can give us, the prayer of rest.

Find your place of solitude, quiet the soul in silence and rest in God, even for a short while. Let God take charge and you breathe.

“Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while.”