

It’s been one of those weeks where everything seems to fall apart simultaneously. The car battery goes dead. The washing machine begins to shimmy, The garbage disposal makes a grinding noise that sounds like the gears being stripped. You twist your ankle after you stub your toe on the bed post when you get up during the middle of the night to answer nature’s third call. The filling in one of your rear molars falls out — while you are eating ice cream. And as a final insult, your shoelace breaks just as you’re getting ready to go out to dinner to relax on Friday evening. It makes me think of one my favorite children’s books: Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.

Jesus says, ***“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”***

The joy of child-rearing has become a burden once again. The oldest has outgrown everything that fit at the end of the school year. The youngest is at a size where nothing seems to fit no matter where you shop. The oldest wants a hairstyle that you wouldn’t wish on the neighbor’s poodle. The youngest is demanding a new video game processor that runs to hundreds of dollars. Both are sulking around the house because “life really stinks.” And the middle child has announced that she is planning to devote her life to the practice of Shintoism, concerning which she saw a documentary on the Discovery Channel.

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The pressures at work are on the rise. The trip into the office is nothing but a sea of orange barrels and cones and now takes twice as long as it did in the spring. The computer is acting up, hiccupping to every command; as a special treat, the computation that you worked on for the last three hours, suddenly disappears from the screen, and IT tells you they can’t get to you for at least four hours . . . your deadline is in three hours. The microwave in the break room does not heat up your lunch, it

disintegrates it. And your boss just got back from a two-week seminar in which — apparently — she learned fourteen new ways to act like the south end of a north-bound horse.

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There are many times in our Christian life when we are called into action. There are hundreds of thousands, indeed millions and billions, of people who are in desperate need of our attention and caring. Men, women, and children are gunned down in cities across our nation, and dozens more are injured. Fires, heat, drought wreak havoc on the lives of almost half the population of our nation. In Afghanistan, the Taliban is resurgent as U.S. and allied troops embark for home.

And closer to home . . . The homeless remain homeless. The unemployed and underemployed are out of work and out of luck. Women still take flight to precarious shelters away from their battering spouses. Youth in both the inner city and outlying suburbs get caught up in gang-related violence. Drugs still claim far too many lives.

Within our own families . . . The divorce rate remains unabated at around 50%. People suffer from both chronic and acute illnesses that isolate and segregate them. Relationships between parents and youth devolve into endless verbal battles and shouting matches. The lonely widow and the solitary single wonder where community can be found. The lost hunger to know the joy of salvation, without ever recognizing that this hunger could be real. The defiantly agnostic reject the one grace that can bring them peace and hope. The wayward and the lethargic waste away in a blind disregard for the vitality of a living, and lived-out, faith. The unforgiving embrace their bitterness like a life-preserver, never suspecting that it has become their anchor.

Yes, there are many times, many circumstances, many ways in which we are called to action in our Christian faith. But today Jesus says to us as He said to the Twelve: ***“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves***

***and rest a while.”***

We need to rest in Jesus. We should want it because we need it. It would be not just a nice thing; it is an essential thing. Vincent DePaul wrote: *“Be careful to preserve your health. It is a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may no longer be able to do anything.”*

This is not rest for rest’s sake; it is rest for refreshment, renewal. That is the true meaning of Sabbath: A time to recharge your spiritual batteries, to reorient yourself from the daily grind, to turn off the churning grey cells and let them cool down. It is time to listen again to the lovely voice of Jesus, to be awakened once again to the still, small voice that bids us draw near.

But how do we learn to listen? That’s the problem I find most people have with trying to get in touch with true Sabbath rest.

One of the doctoral students I was assigned to advise at Ashland Seminary did his dissertation on the value and importance of Sabbath rest. In fact, he designed and wrote a whole retreat model on how to get there (he intended this primarily for pastors in his denomination, but it is applicable for many others — like us?). If I could summarize some of now-Doctor Hinkle’s research results, that summary would say: Carve out the time; this has to happen over time (we are not going to enter into Sabbath rest “on the quick”). Practice silence (this is hard for many of us who are so accustomed to sound filling our lives). In silence, practice listening first to your own body (focus on your breathing, for instance, or your pulse).

Now none of that is uniquely Christian or even religious; many secular psychologists would encourage this kind of “mindfulness.” So here is where we need to zero in on something that is specifically Christian: In your breath, be alert for the presence of the Holy Spirit; as you sit in silence, hearken to that still, small voice of God (by the way, that voice need not be in paragraphs — sometimes all you will hear (because it’s all

you need to hear in that moment) may be a single word. Focus on that word . . . let that word swirl around in your brain for a time . . . settle in with that word. Then begin a dialog with God (this can be overtly verbal, that is, out loud . . . or something you do in silence, only thinking) as to what that word may mean for your life right now.

I would love to give you myriad examples, but I cannot fully, because such encounters are exceedingly personal and complex.

I have been in settings where I was being asked to speak a word of blessing from God to another person, and more often than not that blessing comes as a single word. One time, at a Formational Prayer Seminar with about 150 people attending, a young man came forward for such a blessing and, as I listened for God's voice, I kept coming back to this one word, which made no sense to me. But I spoke it to him, and his face lit up (he later shared with me why that was such an important word for him in that moment, because it definitely addressed something he was struggling with in his life). How did I know that? I did not. I asked the Holy Spirit to reveal His presence, I went to silence, I listened, and a word I could not have come up with after hours of meditation came to me and through me to him.

Now, lest anyone think that I'm, telling you this as a "dig me" moment, I assure you I am not. I simply want to share that this kind of connectedness with God comes as a result of intentionally positioning yourself to receive what God wants you to have, and that another person may need you to give. That begins by listening to Jesus' invitation: ***"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."***

We know from the Gospels that this is precisely what Jesus Himself did. Time and again we read how He went off by Himself. Sometimes the disciples were concerned that they didn't know where He had gone. Jesus did this because He knew that He needed regularly, and with focus, to get in tune with His Father. That ought to suggest to us that we just may need the same.

Take note of what is going on in the lives of Jesus and the Twelve as today's Gospel is unfurled before us. Mark tells us: “. . . **many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.**” I've been there! (You too?) Now, please note also: Jesus did not throw up His hands in disgust at how badly life was turning out. He did not yell and scream at those who kept coming and swirling about Him with their requests and demands. He did not rage off in a huff. (All of those could have been my internal reaction, and every now and again it comes bubbling to the surface as external action, as well.)

What He did was to invite the disciples to join Him in some “spiritual down time.” He recognized that He and they needed to get away, recharge, renew, and then and only then re-engage (but definitely with the intent to re-engage).

This does not have to be planned and organized group activity (as beneficial as that can be). Find a retreat center (there are several in this area; I've used the Jesuit Retreat House in Parma, and the Loyola Retreat House in Clinton; a bit further down toward Dayton is the Bergamo Center) and schedule a one-day personal reflection day (or, if you can, days). Or ask that retreat center about any upcoming programs they have planned that are open to the public (often they do, although I recognize that, as we come out of the pandemic, these things may still be in flux). Or just grab a copy of *Portals of Prayer* and go off into the woods, or down by a creek, or sit in your backyard, read, pray, meditate, recharge.

But do it soon . . . do it often . . . do it intentionally . . . do it regularly. Jesus knows you need it; that's why He has invited you: “***Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.***”

Amen.