

¹After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. ¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

It feels good to be able to pray those words with you again. It has been a while, and I've missed you. It was weird that I was free to worship pretty much anywhere except for here. Technically, I'm still on sabbatical leave for three more days. There is an innocent reason for why I'm back today, but it takes too long to explain. Regardless, I'm glad to be back today and seeing you all

again. Thank you for this gift. I am forever grateful for this time of spiritual, physical, and mental renewal. I want to express my appreciation to the Council, the Mutual Ministry committee, the staff, and the various volunteers who had things under control while I was away. I am also grateful for Pastor Mary and Pastor Rich, who took on the responsibilities that only a pastor can perform. The Council will receive a full report of my sabbatical in the coming weeks. However, for this morning, I'd like to share a little bit of my experience with you.

Prior to the sabbatical, I would often fret over all the things that need to get done from day to day, week to week; all the little tasks to make our worship and our ministry together happen. Whether I was successful at those items or not, I often would wake from anxious dreams about what needed to get done. Both my doctor and a therapist told me I had unhealthy sleep patterns due to these concerns. Once the sabbatical began, it took me a couple of weeks to get into the rhythm of being okay with being away. Yet, I reminded myself that the congregation was in good hands, which brought me comfort. After some time, I began to regularly achieve a full night's rest. That is something I hope to maintain going forward. However, I kid you not: last week – Sunday, July 21 – I awoke in the early morning with the fear that I was supposed to have prepared a sermon for that day. Dreams and concerns like that are bound to happen. Unlike before the sabbatical, last week I was able to get back to sleep, because of one of the tools I've acquired during my time away. I'll speak to that tool momentarily.

Today's gospel lesson is a story you've likely heard before: Jesus takes five loaves and two fish, he gives thanks to God, then he miraculously distributes enough fish and bread to feed the 5,000 people gathered around him. You might know that story because – other than the resurrection – this is the only miracle that is recorded in all four gospels. But did you notice how it all begins? He's trying to get away from the crowds. The guy needs a break from them. He's been healing people left and right, and that ministry has been attracting more and more attention. One thing I had never noticed until this week is that verse 4 says the Passover was near. That means the people should all have been making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem in Judea. Instead, this crowd is seeking out Jesus in the region of Galilee. So this points to the appeal of Jesus, but also it factors into the "bread of life" theme that we will hear more of in the next few weeks. Anyway, Jesus wanted to get

away, but it was cut short by the crowds who wanted more of what he had to offer. So he multiplies the five loaves and two fish to feed the people abundantly. The people are so impressed that they determine it is time to make him their king! He's not going to have it, so he withdraws again.

I can't be the only one who finds it refreshing that even Jesus needs to take a break. Even he needs to withdraw... to take a breath... to reset... to make sure that his full self – body, mind, soul – is centered on wholeness in God. You and I aren't Jesus, who seemingly is able to walk untouched through a crowd that is actively trying to make him a king. Somehow he can part the people to make his escape. You and I aren't Jesus, which means that sometimes we need to give each other the permission to escape and seek wholeness and renewal in God. We need someone else to tell us that this rest is okay... it is healthy... it is necessary for us.

Frequently, either Ginger or I will have a big day and we have to say to the other, "Go take 60 minutes. I've got the kids; I'll handle dinner. Just take a break." Or it can look like a congregation that says to its pastors, "Take a break. We've got this." Yet, it is not just about your pastors. I've always desired that you would find suitable rest in God and not feel overextended. I've asked folks about it quite a lot. The truth is, we all need time to rest in God. Our best selves and our best work do not emerge if we are constantly running ourselves ragged. Frankly, as a Christian community, we should be checking on each other to make sure we are getting the rest in God that our bodies, minds, and souls need. In Mount Pleasant and surrounding communities, it can often feel like we need to avoid rest if we are going to keep up with others. I'd like to think that All Saints can be an oasis from that mindset.

If you've been run ragged, then that time away – even if only 60 minutes – can be used one of two ways: it can be a time of handing over to God all that is weighing on us, or that time can be spent entering a downward spiral of ruminating on all that's wrong. One aspect of my sabbatical was working on that particular issue. If you're like me, we need tools and practice to help us through that. First, intentional breathing has become one effective tool in my life. Another tool I'm using is what allowed me to go back to sleep that night one week ago. It relates to the idea of control. In a nutshell, I've worked on distinguishing the things that I can't control from those things that I can. Once that distinction is made, I am better suited to handle the situation from there. For instance,

when I awoke from the anxious dream about a sermon I had not prepared, I decided to use that exercise. I said to myself, “I can’t control that there are some stressful aspects to my vocation. “I can control my time and my resources in order to be my best.” I kept saying that until I was able to go back asleep.

There is an aspect of this exercise in our gospel lesson today. First of all, John’s gospel presents Jesus as being always in control of the situation, even when he is dying on the cross. So when the crowd of 5,000 gathers around him, he rhetorically asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Philip sees the situation is out-of-control and he says, “Six-months’ wages wouldn’t be enough to buy the necessary bread.” However, then the disciple Andrew says, “Well, this boy over here has five loaves of bread and two fish.” He goes on to question what good that would do. Yet, in that first statement, Andrew acknowledges the small amount of control they have. Those resources are more than enough for Jesus to do amazing work. The grace is that Jesus takes care of the situation from there.

I was away for 12 Sundays, and during that time I had 16 worship experiences. I only kept record of them in order to share some fresh ideas with the Council at All Saints. It was a Spirit-filled experience. Yet I kept noticing one thing was lacking: a home community. I missed you all. I’m glad to be back. I appreciated the opportunity to worship with other communities, and God is present in them all. However, floating around from week to week felt disorienting. Also, I realized that being deeply rooted to a community that is grounded in God’s grace for all people helps me find a deeper connection to God. There is something special – “heavenly” I would say – about being connected to a people: to see and hear about their lives, to know that we’re in this ministry together, to focus on the work of being a community that celebrates God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and to share that grace with all others.

It has been a while, and I’ve missed you. Yet what carried me through it was knowing that we’d see each other again and walk together again. We have each other and we have the experience of God’s radical grace in our lives. Those resources are more than enough for Jesus to do amazing work in this congregation and in the community around us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.