

Sermon for Sunday, July 22, 2012 Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 "Come Away"

As you know, I've just come back from vacation.

It was not your conventional vacation. Yes, Doug and I went to Ireland, but we didn't wander around to the usual places – the Blarney Stone, the Cliffs of Moher, the Waterford factory, and the Jamieson distillery. No, it was a week spent in contemplation and conversation with poetry, with God's beautiful and wild creation, with music that is as important to the life of the people as food and water, and with some thoughtful and intelligent people.

Ostensibly, this was a walking tour of West Clare with the poet David Whyte, but it really became something of a spiritual retreat. We hiked the Burren, a strange area of mountains called slieves with cracked and worn limestone marked by holes and breaks called clinks and grykes – shades of Harry Potter! As we hiked, we would stop periodically for a break. David would read a poem or offer a reflection on the place or something having to do with those who were close to the land. We might eat an apple. We might simply lie back on the grass, trying to recover from the work of climbing, listening to the rush of the wind and the soft sounds of the cows mooing on the pastureland below us.

And then we would gather ourselves, stand up again, and start off on the next part of the path, perhaps engaging in conversation with another of the group, perhaps remaining in silence.

Here's what happens on a vacation like this: you start to hear things in your own heart – not just the wild beating after the physical exertion, but some deeper echo of what is within you.

You hear God's voice, that thrumming undercurrent of vitality and joy.

Of course, you are also aware of the challenge of the walk itself. The Burren, with its uneven limestone blocks and slabs with space in between filled with earth and tiny flowers and grasses, is not an easy stroll. You have to watch step by step to see where your foot should go next. One wrong move and you could put your foot into a deep hole and twist your ankle, or worse. In such a walk, the world reduces down to the two square feet in front of you as you test the ground with your walking stick before placing your next step.

It is exhausting.

And then, after another hour or so, you stop for another break. Despite the cool temperature and bracing winds, you are sweating. You sit down and wait for your heart rate to slow down, and your breathing to return to normal...and you listen again.

You cannot do this kind of a walk without the rest periods, or else your legs become unreliable, and that's when accidents occur.

And it is in the rest periods that you are able to hear something more, not while you are in the midst of the step by step negotiation with the terrain. It is in the rest periods that you are open, in your exhaustion, to what God has to say to you through the wind caressing you and the earth beneath you and the caw of the jackdaw overhead. Your resistance to hearing God is broken by the physical stress – you do not fight it, or interpret it, or question it. You simply receive it, because that is all that you are capable of in the moment.

And in the gift received, that subtle and sweet message from God, you find the strength to do the next part of the walk.

This is nothing new. Mark's gospel reminds us how the disciples needed reminding from Jesus that, in the midst of the work, it was necessary for them to stop a bit, go somewhere and rest, be open to God's healing and restorative love. Having had that moment, however brief it was, it was possible for them to continue on their journey of teaching and healing. The crowd still needed them, but they could not serve the crowd unless they had a respite, and Jesus recognized it and named it for them.

It's a natural inclination for us to keep on working even when we are tired, because there is still work to be done. It's an inclination that is encouraged in our society – "hang in there" seems to be the motto of the age, doesn't it? But what can we say about those who keep on going past the point when they need a break? Often they do not do very good work under those circumstances, because their senses are dulled by exhaustion. Just as folks who keep on hiking without a rest period risk a serious fall because their legs are shot, so too people who work without a time of rest and recovery risk making a serious mistake because their brains or hands or hearts are tired. Current standards for maximum hours for medical residencies allow doctors to work an average of 80 hours a week, and that's a reduction from the past. The likelihood of medical errors increases exponentially with fatigue. Would you really want the surgical resident who has been on duty for 16 hours straight to do a procedure on you? I think not.

It is equally seductive to believe that we are the only one who can do a particular task, so of course we need to push ourselves beyond reasonability in doing that task. And that takes us into the realm of the ego – the belief that no one else can do it. When we state it that way, it sounds a little bit arrogant, doesn't it? Unless you are a nursing mother, I suspect that the task can wait, or another person can do it. Take a break. If Jesus Christ could tell his disciples to take a break – and Jesus regularly took prayer and rest breaks himself, and he was God – you can take a break.

Because, as we discovered hiking up on the Burren, it is not only physical restoration that happens when you stop putting one foot in front of the other, it is a restoration of the soul. In that silence, in that moment of catching one's breath, is the space for the murmur of the Divine.

For me, the moments of stopping were disarming, because I was suddenly aware of something that had been bubbling around in my soul that needed attention – the Spirit was moving in my heart and soul. I never would have heard it without the break from the hike, the putting of one foot in front of the other.

And now, the good news: you don't need to get on an airplane to Ireland to find that restoration of body and soul. You don't need to hike over a mountain. You don't need to walk at all.

You simply have to do what Jesus told the disciples: come away to a deserted place by yourself and rest a while. No television. No computer. No radio. No book, even. Be by yourself. Sit still. Feel the breeze of God's spirit like a silken caress on your heart, and be restored.

The work will wait another day.

Amen.