

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The mystery of God always surprises...such as the timing of today's Gospel reading. We are in the middle of the summer and, read about what? Jesus telling the apostles to take a break for a while...let us get in the boat and get away.

It is like the Eleventh Commandment is, or should be, "Thou shalt take thy rod (in this case, thy fishing rod) and float away from the shore until all but the Lord, thy God, is behind thee".

Actually, Jesus says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all yourselves and rest a while." So, while obviously, it is important to recognize the need for rest and to meet that specific need, this is NOT a sermon focused solely on vacations and time-out. But, I think it safe to say that, in the spirit of interpretation for today's time and culture, Jesus would probably NOT say to the apostles, "Come away to this place where we can drink all week, get completely blitzed, and just lay on the beach with a continual hangover."

In other words, taking a break means relaxation, but not over-indulgence because as we know from scriptural references to Jesus own times of being alone, he retreated to quiet, and rest, and above all...prayer. A time for rest is a time for gathering one's self together...physically, emotionally and spiritually. So, there is a time for rest and relaxation and vacation, and there is a time for work. And that is our springboard into today's message.

For, yet again, the mystery of God is awesome, in terms of the timing for the meeting of God's Word with the dire needs of today because, generally, we are being called into a time of work. To "do the work God has given us to do" in the post-communion prayer within our prayer book. That the Holy Spirit calls us to "move" into. The work that we need to continue, in the very steps of the apostles gathering around Jesus with today's gospel reading.

Consider, for a few moments, what it was that the apostles were doing, out on the road, that caused them to return exhausted. The gospel says that they gathered around Jesus, "and told him all that they had done and taught." And further? "Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them."

Using reasoning and deduction, we can consider...What were these apostles doing? What was causing all of the fuss...so much so that people ran after them, and attempted to predict where they were going to get there ahead of them?

Let me suggest this possibility. Here is a region containing thousands upon thousands of hard-working and suffering people. Scratching out an existence, and little more...such that it would not be fair to call it a living. Oppressed by foreign conquerors, virtually on the bottom end of the economic food chain of their homeland.

Their faith community leaders...those entrusted with the spiritual health and life of the people...promise them no real hope because their leadership points in directions that do not feed the

soul of the people. The leaders of the faith in that time seem to underscore an understanding of God through hard and fast rules. Rules that harden a lengthening distance from God in the name of structure, and order, and organized whatever.

As a result, there is little excitement among the common people....people in need and under stress, for the settled and structured old ways of doing “religion”, let alone anything else recognized as the order of the day. But, they are hungry...starving...in their souls. They may not know why that need is there, but they DO know when it is not getting done.

Now come the questions...for each of us to ponder and pray over this week:

Do any here notice the parallels between 2,000 years ago and today? Could we be just as easily be talking about the established church of 2021 and its relevance in today’s world?

Some time ago, I received an email, linking an article published in the magazine entitled “The Economist” about religious education in England and the struggle over views of what to teach children about God. Here is a quote from that article:

“ We are living through the single biggest change in the religious and cultural landscape in Britain for centuries, even millennia. It is not simply that the number identifying with non-Christian religions has been growing and the number who identify as Christian falling, but that those who say they have “no religion” (but are not necessarily secular) are now the majority.”

The majority say that they have “no religion”. Are you surprised?

I am not surprised. What does the general public today think about church?

Well, in addition to the headlines of child abusing clergy and the higher ups who buried it all under the rug, how about a repeat from four paragraphs back: Their faith community leaders...those entrusted with the spiritual health and life of the people...promise them no real hope because their leadership points in directions that do not feed the soul of the people. The leaders of the faith in that time seem to underscore an understanding of God through hard and fast rules. Rules. Rules that harden a lengthening distance from God in the name of structure, and order, and organized whatever.

But then suddenly comes this traveling preacher and teacher, Jesus, and his followers. And what is the reaction? Can we imagine it?

How is it different, and why?

What do the apostles do?

What is causing the masses to hunt them and Jesus down?

To drop everything to find them out? What? What?

They talked about God. That is it. I imagine that, in very simple and matter-of-fact ways, they shared their stories and lives connected with God.

When we openly talk about God, people are naturally drawn in.

In a personal way, I understand this dynamic a little bit. Before my ordination to the priesthood, I knew, of course, that there was going to be a change in my professional life. That I was not going to be full-time in the courtroom anymore, and obviously, the others who I had spent so many workdays with would notice and be curious as to why. I am a talker, but it was natural for even me to be hesitant, or even reluctant, to talk about this unforeseen change in my life, particularly with people who I had not had reason to assume were spiritual, let alone faithful in any way.

But I had known these folks for years and years. In the courtroom, sure, but also at lunch. Over beers. On the golf courses. At parties. SU games. So, they knew me well enough to know who I am, that I am not some kook, that there would be something to it.

So, over a few hours across a couple of days, in the lawyer's room at the Utica courthouse, I started by telling one here, and another one there, little things within my comfort level about God, and the changes coming in my life. The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to....me.

It was like a bomb went off. But my surprise was that the reaction was overwhelming in a way that I did not expect. For days later, I would walk into that room..and be approached by people who were looking FOR a dialogue. Looking TO answer questions.

And I quickly learned that people everywhere are dying...in a spiritual way, I mean that word literally...dying to have a non-threatening and reassuring conversation about the deeper, spiritual meaning of who we are. Once they see and learn that they can have a safe, non-judgmental, honest and respectful conversation, with someone they can trust, they also drop the reluctance...and the hesitation. And then God does the rest. The kingdom is in view. The blessings of life continue.

Just like these apostles, coming in from the road....we need to talk about God. The gospel according to me and you.

The things that this church does are important, and have their place. But ostensibly you and I are here to be formed, and encouraged, and nurtured to come into this very task: We are all called to be transformed by God, so that we can live this life...with God.

After all, like anyone else who has passed through these church doors, or has even driven past them: we are all made in the very image of God. Meaning that we each are only passing through, and the little quirks of wit, and wisdom, and humor, and personality, are what make our souls who we really are. It is our sub-atomic nature...being made of the very stuff of God...that causes us to rejoice about life, not regret it. To be thankful for our presence, as often as it may sometimes be difficult.

Do we wonder why and how it is so natural for human beings to share with one another? I suspect that God is all over it.

You may be back from vacation, or about ready to start one, or...somewhere in between...going about your daily routine. And here with a wonderful opportunity...ready to continue the "work" that God has given us to do. To love and serve God...in everything we do.

It is not so tough...being grateful, and giving thanks....because it is to God that we leave the real work, in the blessed name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.