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“Relentless” GPPC 7-22-18
Psalm 89:20-37, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

A few weeks ago I was talking with one of our church's young moms. She and her husband are very pleasant people. They have three small children. The husband has an executive position, and the wife works as a nurse at one of our local hospitals. As you can imagine, their life is a breeze, no stress at all.

Just kidding.

This mom told me that she and her husband were getting ready to go on a vacation to a beach resort somewhere. And for the first time they were going to leave the three kids with their grandparents while they were away. Her husband had heard from a staff person at the resort where they were going and this staff person was wondering if they might want to schedule some exciting activities. He was probably thinking parasailing or snorkeling or something along those lines. The couple's answer? Um, no thanks. They just wanted to lie on the beach with a drink and do nothing for several days. As this young woman explained she seems to spend much of her days either wiping kids or wiping

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patients and she just wanted one week when she'd only have to wipe up after herself!

Can any of you relate? Do you have your own stressful life?

Maybe you go to work and, lo and behold, the company has done another downsizing. And they're focusing on more productivity. And for you that means more just busting your butt to do two people's jobs instead of one.

Or you're a parent, and you got up and the dog had thrown up on the carpet, and the baby was crying, and there were dishes in the sink, and food to prepare, and you have a headache, and you wish you could just go to the bathroom without a child tagging along.

Or you have these health concerns that suck your energy and joy and keep you practically living at the doctor's office or hospital.

Or you're retired, but retirement doesn't feel that relaxing sometimes with all that's going on.

Or you're trying to balance work, family, church, exercise, rest, you name it. I'll bet that almost everybody in this room is experiencing some stress.

Mark says the apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. Maybe we can imagine them standing around Jesus tired and excited about how well things had gone. “Jesus, it was amazing. People were really healed. And we could see that folks understood what we were teaching. They listened, and their lives were different, better, hopeful.” Maybe we can imagine what it was like when the apostles came back and gathered around Jesus.

But why were people coming to the apostles (apostles means “sent ones”) why were they going to these apostles Jesus sent out, anyway? Well, there’re two obvious reasons.

First, there was human need. People of the time, like people of every time, were hungry, thirsty, sick and injured, in need of clothing, shelter, and protection. They also needed community, forgiveness, direction in their lives, justice, and peace, just to name a few things. So people were going to the apostles, because of human need.

And people were going to the apostles, obviously enough, because the apostles had been sent and empowered by Jesus to meet human need.

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I was talking to one of our church's members, a longtime leader in this congregation, the other day. And she reminded me that we sometimes get confused or simply forget the purpose of the church. We say, "Well, I'm not involved in the church because I don't get anything out of it." But as this church member reminded me, the primary purpose of the church is not to *get*, it is to *give*. Certainly, we often receive much from the church as we're nurtured and challenged and supported by worship, study, fellowship, and service. But the primary purpose of the church is not for us to *get* something. It's for us to *give* something.

Human need surrounded them. So Jesus empowered and sent the apostles to give by the power of God. So they ministered by doing and teaching, and then they came back to Jesus to report and to celebrate what God was doing through them. Good news.

But as Mark puts it, "Many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." "I just want to have a week when I don't have to clean up somebody else." "Lord, we love these people you've sent us to serve, but we just want to grab a bite to eat in peace."

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Jesus must've noticed not only the apostles' elation but their fatigue. And we suppose he could have said to them, "Suck it up! Quit whining. Get out there and do more ministry!" Drill Sergeant Jesus could've said that.

Instead Jesus said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." So they got in the boat and they did go away to some deserted place, probably Club-Med or Club-Apostle or some such place. "Woohoo! Party, baby! Fist bump! Time to rest. We are *out!*"

Except, as you know, there was a small glitch in the resort booking process. The people in need watched Jesus and the apostles leave. And these poor, needy folks actually arrived at Club-Apostle ahead of them, waiting for them. Can we imagine the scene as the tired apostles and Jesus pulled up to shore, but on the shore were all these people waiting to be helped? What did the apostles feel during those moments? Were they demoralized because they weren't going to get a break from their ministry? Were they angry? Something else? We don't know.

But we know what happened. After the apostles and Jesus went on their mini-vacation, what ministries does Mark tell us *the apostles* performed? (If you looked at the church's E-news sermon questions, you may already know the answer.) What ministries did the apostles perform? Did they feed people, clothe them, heal them, or teach them? What does Mark record that they did? [Pause for answers.] He does not mention that the apostles did anything else, does he? Nothing. Nothing.

But what does Mark say about Jesus? He says Jesus alone went ashore. He saw an enormous crowd. And Mark says he had compassion for them. The Greek word for compassion here is one of my favorite words in the New Testament. It means to have pity down in your guts, gut-wrenching pity. Have you ever felt that, felt compassion for someone so deeply that you actually felt it in your body? That's what Jesus felt. Jesus felt gut-wrenching compassion for people who were like sheep without a shepherd—aimless, directionless, defenseless. So Mark says Jesus began to teach them many things.

He began to teach them many things. And maybe that detail surprises us. If he had such compassion for the crowd, wouldn't we have

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expected Jesus to heal them or give them something (and he did do that other times). But here he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; so he taught them.

It has become fashionable to imagine that we no longer need the teaching of Jesus and that we no longer need careful, sustained study of what he lived and taught. And we do indeed have other sources of wisdom that are important and worth our attention.

But we especially need what this strange and wonderful, fully human, fully divine person taught more than 2000 years ago, and still teaches today. That's what we teach and celebrate and sometimes have vigorous dialogue about in the church—God's teaching for us through Jesus so that we are not sheep without a shepherd.

We learn things such as generous sharing instead of hoarding God's gifts to us.

Treating all people—all genders, ages, races, religions, sexual orientations—all people with mercy and respect, because they are children of God.

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Telling the truth, instead of lying. And if we tell a lie, apologizing and seeking to be more truthful instead of telling more lies to cover it up.

How to be brave when life is scary.

How to forgive others when it's hard. And how to accept God's forgiveness for ourselves.

Finding our direction in life not from how much money or stuff we can accumulate. Or how much power we can push others around with. Or how many diversions we can enjoy but in how we can serve God with our time, abilities, and money. How we can be instruments of God's love with our lives. Those are just a few of the things we learn, right?

So we'll have Vacation Bible School starting tomorrow. And sing and dance and play and read stories and get down on the floor with the little ones and teach them about God's love in Jesus Christ. And we'll keep sending our youth to Montreat and Massanetta, and mission trips near and far. And we'll keep learning about how the gospel speaks not just to our personal lives but to the life of the world and the great issues

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of our time. But, like those first apostles, we'll also go on vacations, as some of our members have done today and I did a couple of weeks ago.

Notice that after Jesus went ashore and taught the great crowd, eventually Jesus got back into the boat with the apostles, and they crossed over to Gennesaret. Once again, people recognized Jesus and came running up with an overflowing hospital waiting room of need. Once again, Jesus kept working, this time healing the sick. And once again, Mark says nothing about the apostles doing anything at all.

The lesson is comforting and clear, isn't it? Human need is relentless, but so is God's love in Jesus Christ. We apostles, "sent ones" are empowered by God to do ministry and to be the church knowing that our primary purpose as church is not to *get* but to *give*. Yet we also need a break from time to time. And it's okay for us to take that break trusting that the God we know in Jesus Christ never goes on vacation.

Where are you in your spiritual journey today? Are you feeling discouraged by all the terrible things in the news? Are you feeling overwhelmed by it, and tempted to give up on serving and speaking out for God's justice and mercy? If so, take a cue from the story. Don't give

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up. Just take a short break, and then jump back into the ministry you're called to do.

Or maybe you feel as though you've been on the sidelines and not been serving as you are able. That's okay. Now's the time to find your particular ministry (I can help you figure it out, if you like) and get back in and be a part of what God is doing to meet human need.

Human need is relentless, but God's gut-wrenching compassion in Jesus Christ is more relentless still. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." And then return ready to be instruments, part of the relentless love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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