

GIVE ME A BREAK!

According to meteorologists, here in the Northeast, anytime you reach 90 degrees on three consecutive days you have heat wave. This past week, as we easily exceeded ninety on several days, we had the first official heat wave of the season.

I don't do real well when it's so hot. I get cranky and a bit lethargic. And I get especially irritated when a cheery weatherman or woman talks about the Heat Index. "It'll be 92 degrees tomorrow," they'll say with a big smile, "but with the humidity it'll feel like 101!" Give me a break! If it's hot, it's hot! And once you pass ninety, at least in my book, who cares?

I imagine in the south, where temperatures are routinely much higher than they are here, they define a heat wave differently. But even there, hot is still hot!

On our recent youth mission trip to Beaumont, Texas, the temperature exceeded 95 degrees every single day we were there. And we felt it! We just were not used to such prolonged exposure to the warming effects of the sun.

Our work with the local Habitat chapter included painting, caulking, carpentry and even some roofing. One day the guys on the roof had to quite early, their feet were literally sticking to the shingles!

To take advantage of the relative cool of the early morning we started work at 7:00 AM each day, no small feat for a group of teenagers! But bless their hearts, they were up and ready each morning!

We were told to make sure we drank lots and lots of water. We also were told to take regular breaks, and at exactly eleven o'clock each day the site supervisor ordered everyone to lay down their tools, find some shade, drink some water or Gatorade and eat their lunch.

"No one," he said, "absolutely no one, is to start working again until noon. Take a full hour's break, no less."

The first day, being eager beavers from the north, we found this forced rest a bit annoying. After all, we were there to build houses, not guzzle Gatorade and engage in chit chat. But as the week wore on we discovered the wisdom of our supervisor's order. And we realized our ability to work a long day in the hot sun was due, in part, to the fact that we stopped and rested along the way.

The human body is not designed to endlessly plug along. It needs rest. But it is not just our bodies that need to slow down and take a breather.

Carla Gorrell tells a story about a group of African workers who contracted to hand carry some very heavy equipment to a remote construction site. They trudged through the jungle for several days, when suddenly one day they took off their packs and sat down in the middle of the path. Despite the urgings of their supervisor they refused to get up. Finally, out of sheer exasperation, he asked them why they refused to move.

“Sir,” said one of the men, “we are waiting for our souls to catch up to our bodies.”

That is precisely what Jesus wanted to do in the story we’ve just read from Mark. He wanted to give his soul, and the souls of the disciples, time to catch up with their bodies. They had been very busy teaching, preaching and healing. They had traveled from place to place meeting the needs of the sick, the dying and the forsaken. Jesus had even dispatched the disciples in pairs in many directions so that they could multiply their efforts and bring hope and healing to even more people.

Finally, exhausted and depleted, they all reassemble on the shores of Galilee. Jesus hears their reports and then suggests they all take a bit of a retreat; spend some time alone with each other and with God. Rest and pray. “Come away [with me] to a deserted place,” he says, “and rest awhile.” (6:31) Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, “Let’s take a break and get a little rest.” (*The Message*, 1820)

So they all pile into a boat and head across the lake to a remote spot on the other side. But someone sees them leave, so folks run on ahead and chase them down. And, as they draw the boat up onto the beach, there stands a crowd of people to meet them.

Jesus is moved to help them out, and so the plan for retreat is set aside, and Jesus and the disciples plunge in, teaching, healing and, via the famous miracle of the loaves and fishes, eventually feeding the crowd.

At long last, the impromptu supper is over. They’ve even gathered up the leftovers. And Jesus, seeing that the disciples are completely spent, turns and tells them to get back in the boat and head off for some rest. Then, he sends the crowd home, climbs the mountain, and engages in a time of rest and prayer himself. In the end, Jesus and the disciples get the break they so desperately need.

I imagine you’ve heard this story of the loaves and fishes many, many times. I imagine you’ve heard several sermons about it as well. I know I’ve probably preached on it at least a dozen times over the years. It’s a great story! But somehow, I’ve always overlooked the fact that one of its central points is not just about the good *work* Jesus and the disciples are doing, but rather, the rest and renewal they need and eventually get.

The story starts by recounting their failed attempt to go on retreat, and ends with their finally getting a break.

Now the key to understanding the real power in this story is found in recognizing a few simple facts.

First, Jesus and the disciples, when they had worked hard, realized the importance of taking a break and getting some rest—reconnecting with their own souls, reconnecting with God.

Second, they didn't just talk about it; they set out to do it.

Third, when life intervened as it sometimes does; when the crowds needed their attention and something to eat, they responded with loving care.

But, and this is the most important note, they didn't forget their need for rest, and after the unexpected interruption occurred, once they met the need, they went back to plan A, and took their break.

What happens to many of us, I suspect, is we let life get in the way of our times of retreat. We let those urgent concerns overwhelm us and move us from seeming emergency to seeming emergency, never stopping to rest and pray. More than one person has told me over the years, "I just don't have time to pray."

If that sounds familiar, here are a few suggestions.

First, set aside a regular time for rest and prayer. I take about 30-45 minutes almost every morning before I even leave the house to meditate, read the scriptures, journal and pray. You may not have 30-45 minutes. What's important is not length of time, but regularity. Five minutes every day is better than none!

Second, worship on a regular basis. Sunday services can be a wonderful respite. (Though I hope you'll not sleep through the sermon! I love this week's *Thought for Meditation*, from Leonard Sweet, "Jesus took naps." When I gave it to my secretary Marcia she said, "You're asking for trouble!")

Third, consider a retreat once a year. I retreat each spring with members of my religious order the Brothers and Sisters of the Way. Here at Saugatuck we offer both a Men's and a Women's Retreat every year. Why not go this coming season?

We all need a break now and then. We all need times to reconnect with ourselves and with God. But it won't happen unless we plan for it. And it won't happen unless we are willing to be flexible, like Jesus and the disciples.

The heat here, and even the heat in Texas, is nothing compared to the heat in Iraq, where temperatures sometimes soar above 130 degrees. And so regular times of rest and renewal are even more important for folks caught up in the stress of battle and warfare in that distant land.

In a recent article describing many of his experiences as an Army Chaplain and Episcopalian priest, Stuart Kenworth spoke of the various new sounds in his life. “Day and night,” he writes, “there has been a whole new world of sounds to adjust to.” He speaks of explosions, and the call of the muezzins. He mentions the whistle of missiles. He talks about helicopters passing overhead and the wind rushing across the desert sands. Many of these sounds are unsettling at best, some even unnerving.

But one set of sounds, bring him and the soldiers he serves, much needed rest. “Finally,” he writes, “the last sounds I want to share with you are ones I both voice and hear every Saturday evening at 1730 and every Sunday afternoon at 1300. The clink of a glass decanter as wine is poured [for communion], the sound of God’s holy word being read, prayers for loved ones, wounded soldiers and peace in this place all being offered to God

“These are sounds that bring comfort and strength with an immediacy and intimacy that is almost overwhelming when expressed and heard here [in Iraq.] They have the power to make any place on God’s good earth become home. And they do so here right in Baghdad, amid the struggle

[And these sounds] also speak of another home, another time, another peace and hope that is grounded in our faith and God. It is a deep and abiding sense that this struggle, too, will one day pass. . . .” (*Washington Windows*, July/August 2006)

If Jesus and the disciples needed rest from time to time, if they needed regular times of prayer, how much more you and me. If those on the battlefields of Iraq can find time for rest and prayer, certainly you and I can do the same! And while we may not be in harm’s way like folks in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel or the Gaza, we too have struggles. We too need a break now and then.

In fact, here in Fairfield County, we could all do with a break. Here in Fairfield County we all need a bit of retreat, some rest and prayer. Here in Fairfield County we would all be wise to simply wait, from time to time, and let our souls catch up with our bodies.

For this day, and every day, Jesus extends the same invitation to you that he extended to those disciples long ago: “Let’s take a break and get a little rest.”

**Amen
John H. Danner**