

Proper 11 – Year B  
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St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos  
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Wow. What a journey it has been getting here!

My connection to TEC began with youth ministry in VT in 1994, at the age of 33. It hit me as I was preparing this that the oldest students that year would have been 17, and it's 24 years later, which means they're now 41. And that just about blows my mind.

Rock Point is the diocesan retreat center in Burlington, VT. It sits on the shores of Lake Champlain, and so much of my formation took place there as a youth leader, working with high school and middle school students.

I guess I didn't realize it at the time, but Rock Point was a deserted place for me and for us – a place where we went to be alone and encounter Jesus.

Because my first thought as I read the Gospel passage for this morning was “wow, how cool would that have been, to be one of the disciples and be invited to go away to a deserted place with Jesus to rest and to pray?”

And my second thought was “wow; we actually *are* invited to do that; and through the gifts and reality of the Eucharist and the Resurrection, Jesus *is* present with us when we take the time to go to those deserted places to renew ourselves.

And that got me to thinking: where are our deserted places? What are those places where we can go off to rest and be with Jesus?

One such place for me is a fishing cabin on the Upper Sacramento River in northern CA, about 15 miles south of Mt. Shasta, and I was just there this past week. Now, I don't actually fish, but

my son Andrew has loved to fish since he was little, so our vacations have largely been centered around fishing. I take him, and simply sit by the river, and just let everything else melt away for a few days.

But even that time apart, contemplating this sermon and reflecting on deserted places, caused me to see church differently – as a deserted place where we are invited to go away and be with Jesus.

Now, I will acknowledge that sometimes church doesn't exactly feel like time away, or a respite from the world – like a deserted place where we let the toils and troubles of the world melt away. Sometimes, it feels like anything but going away with Jesus for respite and renewal.

For instance, in my role as Canterbury Chaplain, I now prepare and serve a home-cooked meal for our college students and young adults after church on Sunday mornings during the school year. So, I'm often running out during the announcements in the middle of the service to pre-heat the oven, and then cutting out again after receiving Communion to put the food in the oven.

So it often doesn't quite feel like I'm honoring church as a deserted place where I've gone off to be and to pray with Jesus.

And that's when it hit me. Today's Gospel reading is one of those ones that's chopped up and spliced together, so there are a bunch of verses omitted in the middle. And do you know what's in the middle, in those omitted verses? Well, it's the story of the feeding of the 5000 in the wilderness. That's right: in one moment, Jesus is inviting us, his disciples, his followers, to come away with him to a deserted place to be rejuvenated, and in the next breath he's telling us "you give them something to eat" when the multitudes see us and follow us into the wilderness and we become anxious because it's getting late and they don't have anything to eat.

And I think that mirrors the tension (and I don't use the word tension with any negative connotation; but in a neutral sense, like the tension of the force of gravity, which keeps the planets in their courses) – but the tension we often feel in church about the need for this space to be a place of respite, a deserted place, where we can be and feel renewed with Christ, and a place where we are simultaneously being asked and empowered to act with compassion to meet the needs of the world.

It seems that Jesus takes the time to honor both – the deserted-place theme, and Jesus going off to pray, comes up over and over again in Mark, so we need to pay attention to that and honor the need for respite, prayer, and renewal. But Mark is also a Gospel of action where Jesus and the disciples are engaged in feeding the multitudes and healing a broken world.

And then, sometimes the tension creeps in even further, because of the current political climate, and we have another layer to navigate. Then the question becomes how do we seek and find respite, how do we feed and heal the multitudes, and how do we nonviolently confront injustice and oppression?

It seems and sounds like a tall order, and I don't claim to have the answer, but some answers are better than others and I've found one that I've used as a guiding principle, and I'd like to share it with you this morning.

Some or many of you may be familiar with the work of the Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. In Thay's meditation entitled Love in Action, there are 14 precepts of the Order of Interbeing, and, being the devout trinitarian that I am, I will share three of them with you this morning.

“Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-

attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them while they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as anger or hatred arises, turn your attention to your breathing in order to see and understand the nature of your anger or hatred and the nature of the persons who have caused your anger or hatred.

Do not use the religious community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice, and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.”<sup>1</sup>

And that last one, I think, is really key, because I return to it over and over. It can feel like walking a tightrope, balancing these challenging but essential elements of being a community of faith where love and justice are practiced and enacted, and where sacred, quiet time and space apart is created and honored; but I don't worry about trying to be perfect, or getting it just right; rather, I simply strive toward it as a goal: how do I continue to confront injustice without bringing partisan conflicts into it, and honor this space as a deserted place where we can commune with Jesus.

Because, if our Gospels teach us anything, it's that Jesus stood outside the powers and principalities, challenging and dismantling the forces that oppress and exclude those on the margins. Just as in Jesus' time, the structures of power are firmly in place in the halls of our government; and yes it's true, our parties and political leaders navigate those structures differently; but as followers of Christ we are also with Christ in our resistance to those structures, such that, as our great 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglican theologian, William Stringfellow, in his essay “The Liturgy as a Political Event,” noted: “Christians are perpetually in the position of complaining about the status quo, whatever it happens to be. [Our] insight and experience of reconciliation in Christ are such that no secular society can possibly correspond to, or much approximate, the true society of which [we] are citizens in Christ. [We] are always, in any society, in protest. Even

when a cause which [we ourselves] have supported prevails, [we] will not be content but will be the first to complain against the ‘new’ status quo.”<sup>ii</sup>

And we see, as Paul teaches this morning in the Letter to the Ephesians, we are all one in Christ; the dividing wall, the hostility between us, has been knocked down; there are no divisions, no strangers, no aliens, we are all, each of us, citizens with the saints, and Christ is our peace.

If we don’t take time to honor the need for deserted places and quiet time for prayer with Jesus, it’s going to be really difficult for us to find that peace. If we’re constantly angry, anxious, and upset about the state of and the affairs of the world, if we don’t take the time to be alone with Jesus and go to those deserted places, then we’re not going to be very effective at feeding and healing the multitudes. I really think that’s what Mark is trying to teach us in these lessons about the need to go off to a deserted place.

Our need for deserted places is not so that we can escape from the suffering of the world, but so that, like Jesus, we can more effectively enter into and transform that suffering.

When I reflect on the metaphor of the temple that Paul uses, and how we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God, I think we can go even deeper and recognize that we are being called to create that deserted place within ourselves, so that we can go there and commune with the Trinity.

So let us remember that co-equal with our duty as followers of Christ to enact justice and healing, is our need to honor, to go to, and to create those deserted places with Christ, where we can find rest, respite, and renewal.

Jesus invites us to come away to a deserted place in order to renew and restore that temple within us. In the Eucharist, we receive the Body of Christ, and we become the Body of Christ; and it is

in Christ, as Paul writes, that “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

May we all, each of us, come to recognize and honor, in ourselves, our souls, spirits, minds, and bodies, and in all of creation, this sacred structure that has been, and is being, built together into a holy temple, in Christ – a dwelling place for God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Peace is Every Step*, “Love in Action,” pp. 127-9.

<sup>ii</sup> Stringfellow, William, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, “The Liturgy as a Political Event,” pp. 150-64.