

Respites

John 6:1-21 Psalm 145 7-30-06

Summertime
 And the livin' is easy,
 Fish are jumpin'
 And the cotton is high.
 Oh yo' daddy's rich
 An' yo' ma is good lookin'
 So hush, little baby,
 Don't you cry

One of these mornin's,
 You's gonna rise up singin'
 Then you'll spread yo' wings
 An' you'll take to the sky.
 But till that mornin',
 There's ain't nothin' can harm you
 With your Daddy an' Mummy
 Standin' by

In case someone hasn't noticed, this is, indeed "the good old summertime"-- that special time of year when we like to take off on vacations to one place or another. Not a week goes by without someone telling me that they will be "on the Cape" or "up in Maine," or "on the Vineyard" or "in Southington," or "on the Jersey Shore" or "away camping" or "in California," or "on Nantucket" where I understand they have clams in a bucket. From week to week, I usually know where each and every person is. I always tell the vacationers to have a wonderful time, travel safely and that God always knows where they are, not to mention, what they are up to.

When I was a child, lo those many years ago, I used to enjoy leisurely summers. I remember spending lots of time in the local swimming pool or at the library where I would check out six books at a time—the most allowed—or at a local amusement park where I would spend the days whirling away on one ride or another.

I also remember the times away on vacation. There was always a lake as our destination either at my aunt's home in way northern Wisconsin, just a few miles from the UP (Upper Peninsula of Michigan) or on Big Green Lake, a lake my father loved dearly. We always rented a house on its shores for as long as possible. There we would fish and swim and canoe and water ski and become close acquaintances of poison ivy. An affinity that I have to this day. Those vacations were looked forward to all year. We did not travel around when I was a child but stayed in one place for vacation.

That all changed when I supposedly grew up and we were raising our girls. They were often put in a van—one was less likely to get carsick than in a car—and we traveled from Wisconsin to Jekyll Island, Georgia, to Fresno, California to Niagara Falls to Portland, Maine and many places in between. I will always remember seeing the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia and giving in to the powerful urge to touch it. And there were trips to New York City several times, the Algonquin Hotel, The Waldorf, and Sardi's and visits to Broadway and FAO Schwartz, Central Park and for culture, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MOMA. As I have gotten older some of the details of these trips have blurred but the girls remember them clearly. Rarely would we be away less than two weeks at a time.

After we purchased my present home on Lake Michigan our vacations were spent there. Close to water and sandbars and canoe and stars and toads and lots of deer. As the children grew older, our leisurely vacations turned into short respites— defined as "intervals of rest or relief"—

bits of time snatched away from the hurly burly of life—to renew and refresh tired minds and bodies. Those brief times of just “being away” were looked forward to every bit as much as the longer vacations of younger days. I still look forward to brief respites to places closer to the ocean from time to time—escapes to Wickford and Galilee and Narragansett, which I have finally learned how to spell.

On this hot summer morning, I have taken a bit of a respite from readings from the Old Testament and the Letters. But, a reading from the New Testament, the covenant of our faith, remains. In it we see Jesus and his hard-pressed disciples seeking little times of respite and peace away from the crowds that followed them. They never shirked their commitments to those around them and we can probably be certain that they would set aside planned respites to serve those who followed so closely and those who needed them desperately. But there were those times when they would go up on a mountain or hop into a boat and simply take off.

Following the feeding of the five thousand in the gospel of John, a miracle considered one of sharing, Jesus thought it wise to retreat so that he would not be made king putting him in political contention for the leadership of Israel. That was not his mission. His desire was to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. This mission consumed him and drove him forward.

There must have been times the task threatened to overwhelm him and he found himself to be bone weary. We all know how it feels to be that tired. Those times come to us all when we can barely pick up one foot after another and keep on moving. We also can become brain weary. When we are forced to cope with one situation after another with no space to breathe and regroup in between, our mental processes threaten to shut down. We become forgetful at best and irritable at worst. When we reach these stages of exhaustion we understand what Jesus meant when he said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” Or, in the words of an old Girl

Scout song sung around campfires so many warm summer evenings ago: “There is no bed for my weary head, Give me a hill topped with trees, Tuck a cloud up under my chin, Lord, blow the moon out, please.”

When there is no place of rest for us where we are, we need to allow ourselves the time and space to find one a bit apart. We should not feel guilty about doing nothing for a space in time. There are times when all the doing in the world does absolutely nothing and when we need to focus instead on just being. Just being the blessed creatures we were created to be. Just being with someone who really matters to us. Just being quiet and thoughtful. Just being respectful of our selves and who we are right at that particular moment. At any given time, you see, we are the beloved and cherished children of God. As a friend always asks, “Can it get any better than that?”

Those times apart from the world around him must have been moments when Jesus could refocus on the work at hand, consider the motley crew of disciples helping him, examine his priorities and those of God for his life, possibly go for a swim or sing around a campfire and let some of the stress go. He knew that it would always be there waiting for his return to the daily grind of life. We know this, too. So we need to remember to take a break from all it is that drives us whether it is in the summertime, when “the living is easy” or in any other time of the year. Renewal and refreshment for our lives awaits us and is one of God’s dearest gifts. Amen