

Since he became Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry has called us to see our church as “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement” – an invitation to reclaim the deepest origins of who we are as disciples and followers of Jesus, and to make Jesus visible in our lives.

The idea of Jesus as a “movement” is a reminder that before the church came into being, there was growing popular recognition of Jesus as the embodiment of God’s love and justice. If we want to know what the Jesus movement first looked, felt and sounded like, we get a vivid snapshot today in Mark’s gospel.

Yes, Jesus and his disciples are part of a ministry on the move, spreading to every social setting around the Sea of Galilee – “villages...cities... farms” (6:56). People who are hurting, hungry and hopeless are energized by the promise of new life that radiates around Jesus, and excited crowds keep turning up. That energy is palpable in phrases that jump out today: “Many were coming and going...they hurried on foot from all the towns... people at once recognized him and rushed about and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was” (6: 31, 33, 55).

In modern terms we might say Jesus has attained rock-star status. But Jesus offers a relationship and a message that are both more enduring and more disruptive of the status quo than what any entertainer or celebrity could bring.

What sustains the Jesus movement? In today’s story the disciples learn two precious and seemingly contradictory things that remain essential as we follow Jesus. The first is: take the time to rest together in the quiet company of Jesus in a way that’s detached from the busy-ness of life; and the second is, be prepared for interruptions at any moment, when God calls us to see and respond to the needs of those around us.

As the movement builds momentum, the disciples realize that Jesus does not intend to manage it alone. He has called “the twelve” and sent them out in pairs with “authority” to drive away demons that block God’s love. (6: 7). Now they return to Jesus after their first experience of ministry, healing and teaching in his name.

They might be asking one another: How did it go, learning to travel light and rely on the hospitality of strangers? How did it feel to sit with people who yearn to cast off their burdens and look to God in hope? What was it like to share Jesus’ good news about the new meaning of power and authority in God’s realm? Was it exhilarating? Exhausting? Was it a good idea to quit our day jobs to do this?

As Jesus begins to listen to their reports, how relieved they must be when he says “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile” (6: 31). Jesus knows his busy friends haven’t had time to eat, and he calls them into his boat to go in search of some quiet time. Jesus’ words are striking because up until now, Mark has given us a

fast-paced account of what Jesus and his friends are “doing” together. Now we also learn the importance of their simply “being” together.

I expect most of us know what it’s like to be involved in a long, intense and tiring project-- in our work or school lives, in our families or perhaps as volunteers in ministry-- and to look forward to setting it aside to relax and recharge. And even when we find opportunities to break away from things that preoccupy us, it’s hard to detach completely, as calls, emails, texts and invitations to Zoom meetings can follow us anywhere. Jesus’ call to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile” sounds like balm for a weary soul and as a truly countercultural signal in our harried world.

Imagine what it’s like to be with these disciples. I can feel a sense of ease coming over me as the boat glides to a deserted beach for our picnic with Jesus. I’d look forward to the chance to get to know Jesus and my friends more deeply; to learn and pray together; to gaze at the beauty of creation; to take a nap. But as the boat reaches the place where we’re headed, my heart sinks: it’s not deserted. It is packed with anxious, expectant people.

Our respite is interrupted by a determined crowd of folk who seem wired to track Jesus’ location, outrunning our boat and arriving ahead of us. For me, the interruption at first brings disappointment and maybe impatience. My agenda was set. I needed that getaway. But then I begin to notice what the interruption brings out in Jesus.

Here, and everywhere the boat lands, there’s an instant mutual recognition between Jesus and those who open themselves to his healing presence. Mark tells us “people at once recognized him” (6: 54). “Recognized” in the Greek means not only that they’ve seen his face before – many of them haven’t – but that in a deep and authentic way they know him and trust in his restorative and liberating power.

And Jesus recognizes them. He “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6: 34). Again, the words Mark chooses are telling. What arises in Jesus at the sight of those who rush to meet him is compassion, not in the sense of mere pity, or sympathy, or even empathy that helps him relate to their suffering. But here, “compassion” means literally “gut-wrenching” – a visceral awareness of their need arising from deep in his insides, drawing him close to them, like a parent to a child.

Mark does not specify just what illnesses or setbacks draw the people to seek out Jesus, nor does he tell us what type of help Jesus offers other than that “he began to teach them many things” (6: 34). All we know is that they come with great cares pressing upon them, looking for relief they aren’t getting from their imperial rulers and religious leaders. In Hebrew scripture, “shepherd” often refers to a ruler anointed to

dispense justice in God's name. Jesus ministers among poor, exploited farmers who seek his spiritual pastoring as well as relief from an economic system that casts people aside.

We don't have to look far to recognize our world's deep need for the Jesus movement. And one way we lift it up at St. Columba's is in our commitment to "live God's love." When I hear this phrase, I think first about how we reveal God through our loving response to those who are isolated or hurting, and in all we do to promote justice.

Every week we see evidence of God's love lived among us. Just like those who "rushed about to bring the sick on mats to wherever (Jesus) was," so too do you minister to one another, spreading the community's caring spirit to those who face illness, loss or trouble. You carry that spirit into our ministries with neighbors whose needs are too often overlooked by people in power.

Living God's love surely involves not only *doing* such actions that the Jesus movement stirs us to take but also going off in the boat for time apart simply *being* with Jesus. We can seek this on our own by trying to create a regular experience of Sabbath, to rest in God in the midst of our non-stop culture. We can create a spirit of Sabbath as we gather in groups for prayer, retreat, study, and conversation about how God moves in our lives. Like the disciples, we need chances for rest and renewal in Jesus' company and one another's, away from the demands that the world, and we, have imposed on ourselves.

And yet Jesus is never detached from the world, so *being* with him leads us just as inevitably into *doing* with him as the disciples discover when their retreat is interrupted. Perhaps this is a chance for them and for us to recognize that to know Jesus, we must meet him not only at times we choose but in and through unplanned encounters with those who are most vulnerable among us, those whose need is so great and whose faith is so strong that "touching even the fringe of his cloak" can bring healing (6: 56).

It's been said that interruptions can be seen as divine appointments\* – plans God has made for us that don't appear on our calendars and whose meaning we often can't readily discern. For some of us, the pandemic was an interruption that opened new opportunities for being with Jesus; for others it was a reminder of our call to be doing with Jesus. Now as pandemic life is interrupted and a "new normal" begins, we can look again as individuals and as a community at how to bring balance to these essential features of life with Jesus.

As we follow Jesus onto the Galilee shore, experiencing the compassion He shows towards us and witnessing His unhesitating solidarity with all who struggle, it's natural to doubt our capacity to replicate His love. But Jesus doesn't expect us to do it

all on our own. That's why He sent his disciples out two by two and sends us forth as a community to meet all people as God's beloved. If we can serve even as the

fringe of Jesus' cloak for those who await the love and justice of God, we will keep the Jesus movement flourishing.

Thanks be to God.

\*phrase cited is from: <https://rockthis.org/encouragement/divine-appointments-how-god-uses-interruptions-to-change-our-lives>