

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Finding Jesus in Deserted Places”

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The Gospel tells us that Jesus has genuine pity for us because so often in life we look like sheep without a shepherd. And, what I think he means by that is, we are sheep who many times don't have good shepherds as Jeremiah gripes about in the first reading. I find this to be an important, albeit scathing reminder for deacons, priests and bishops today in so many ways. However, God knows that there are a lot of people in the secular world today who would love to be embraced as our shepherds. Musicians, movie stars, the list goes on. Honestly, all you have to do is turn on the cable news channels and you will find a plethora of people trying to shepherd you, Rachael Maddow, Tucker Carlson, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, the list goes on. The song “Ring them bells” from Bob Dylan comes to mind whenever I turn on the television anymore, “The shepherd is asleep where the willows weep and the mountains are filled with lost sheep”. Isn't that the truth? There comes a point in life when it is healthy to realize that nobody out there trying to shepherd me can say or do anything that is going to ultimately save me. Or, as Archbishop Sartain liked to say, only Jesus has the words of eternal life. Only Jesus can be the Good Shepherd. This is how I see the first reading from Jeremiah. History is filled with charismatic people who eventually disappoint. Jesus is the only shepherd worth our time.

How do we grow closer in our relationship with Jesus? How do we deepen our relationship with our Good Shepherd? Jesus gives his disciples excellent advice that we should pay attention to. Jesus says, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” In a culture that values work over leisure, it is good to be reminded by our Lord that leisure is in fact important. We need to build in breaks during our day when we can find a quiet room with no one around and just breathe. We also need to have a Sabbath day every week just to rest and pray like we are doing today. We also need a few days here or there, or a few weeks every year if we are blessed to do so, to simply get away to a place we can recharge. Vacations are important. And, if I were to shepherd you for a moment on how best to plan time off or a vacation that will be spiritually beneficial, that will help you find that deserted place, consider the following.

One way of viewing a vacation is to see it as a time to escape, to forget, to vacate our minds, to take a break from our daily reality by being immersed into something completely different. I think of places like Disneyworld or Las Vegas as examples of places where people can go to completely escape, to be entertained, and for a little while forget about normal life. And there is nothing wrong with this kind of thing in moderation. However, there is another way to plan a vacation that isn't about escaping or vacating, but rather is summarized best with the word re-create, where we get the word recreation. The idea here is, instead of seeing vacation as a time of escape and a time to forget who we are, recreating in my mind is more about seeing this time as an opportunity for retreat to that deserted place and to reflect, allowing God to enter into the mix so we can take a deeper look at our lives and where we are going. Do you see the difference?

From my point of view, the culture in which we live seems to encourage vacating more often than recreating in my opinion. After a hard day at work or school the temptation might be to return home, open that bottle of wine or beer, and sit in front of the cable news channel for hours or, if you are younger, play video games into the middle of the night, or mindlessly surfing the web and going to sites we have no business going to. The idea is to vacate, escape and forget the events of the day. It is understandable when you consider that we are a culture that demands a lot out of people and then offers all kinds of ways to self-medicate. It is everywhere. It can become a vicious cycle that can end up becoming spiritually dangerous, not to mention expensive.

Recreative activities on the other hand tend to be a lot less expensive and far more spiritually beneficial because these activities usually involve opportunities like coming to church together like you are doing today, perhaps sitting around a table somewhere enjoying a meal with friends or family rather than staring at screens, or just finding that deserted place Jesus is talking about where we can pray and take time for contemplation.

I also think the implications here can go far beyond how we schedule our free time. I believe this can also be an opportunity for us to take a spiritual audit of how we are doing right now in our vocations. Every so often I think it is healthy for us to ask ourselves the question: Am I going through my life right now trying to maximize opportunities to forget who I am or who God calls me to be? Or, am I going through life right now trying to maximize opportunities to better understand my life, who I am and where I am going? I believe the answer to that question will also reflect how strong our relationships are at present, how responsible we are with our time and money, and truth be told: how happy we really are.

Where is the best place to ask those questions? Jesus tells his disciples to go away to a deserted place where they can rest and pray. Where is your deserted place? Where does Jesus call you to find rest each day? What is one re-creative activity we can do this coming week? These questions are important because the world in which we live in is filled with a lot of noise and a lot of famous people who want to sway your opinions and shepherd you to God knows what. None of these people can save you. Only Jesus can. Therefore, it is good from time to time for us to reinvest in re-creative activities that will help deepen our relationship with the Good Shepherd, who loves us more than we can love ourselves, and who will lay down his life for his sheep.