

I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About...
Faithful Families in a Crazy Busy Culture

Mark 6:30-32, 45-46

August 7, 2022

“It’s a question of relevance.” Those were the words spoken at a breakfast a few months ago that I was having with a friend. My friend is a deeply gifted, service-minded young professional in a major southern city who has left the faith of his youth and the church he always loved. The reason? “Chris,” he said, “I just don’t feel that the church is speaking to what weighs most heavily on my heart. It’s a question of relevance.” As I listened and bit my tongue when defensive responses came to my mind, what I heard was not hostility, but disappointment—even a longing that bordered on hope. Maybe the church *could* speak to that heaviness. Maybe the voice of faith *does* have something to say about life in the real world.

For the next four Sundays, as we settle back into the routines and rhythms of life, we’ll be testing those possibilities. Over the last year or so, I’ve been collecting topics that at least some of you would like to hear addressed in worship. “I wish the preacher would talk about...” And don’t worry if your topic isn’t on the list. I’m hoping to do this again, and I’m always taking suggestions.

And how is it already August? Is summer really almost over? Wait, school starts this week? No fair!

Every single one of those statements was spoken in my home over the last week. Some of them were accompanied by tears—most of those were mine. I wonder if you’ve heard or said any of them this week. Yes, we’re at that point in the year when we marvel at the rapid passage of time and worry. Perhaps we worry about whether or not we’re spending that time well. About a year ago, we were preparing to

launch the first “normal” program year since the pandemic began, and I was talking with a parent in the congregation about her family’s schedule. She expressed the heartfelt desire to hold off the stress and the overwhelm of so-called normal life for as long as she could. She named the temptations to busyness that would soon be returning. “But,” she said, “I don’t want you to think we’re avoiding church. It’s just one more thing we’ve got to balance now. How do you keep your priorities clear as the schedule picks up again?” How, indeed! I wonder about the role of faith for people who have so little bandwidth, such thin margins.

Over the summer, author Tim Kreider wrote an essay that has been rattling around in my brain as we consider this question. Kreider reflects on the shifts we’ve seen in recent years over the concept of busyness. He remembers the attempt not long ago to rebrand frantic activity as a virtue, to brag about our over-scheduled lives, to participate in what another writer memorably called, “the cult of busy.”ⁱ That description reminds me of a favorite cartoon. It’s of a woman seated on a chair. She’s leaned forward, and she’s frantically knitting with all her might. The caption under the picture reads, “I like to stay as busy as possible to take my mind off how much I hate the things I do to stay busy.” This impulse to ceaseless activity has given rise to new vocabulary. My favorite is the phrase “crazy busy,” which sometimes seems like the only acceptable response when someone asks you how you’re doing. “I’m crazy busy. How about you?”

For decades now, churches have attempted to wedge themselves into the overcrowded schedules that we

all both complain and brag about maintaining. Yes, we joined the cult of busy with outright enthusiasm, pumping out programs and groups and classes and mission projects as quickly as we could, hoping that we might claim a prized place on your packed schedules. But I wonder about that approach. I wonder if we've added activity without increasing fulfillment. I wonder if we've created lists rather than encounters with the sacred. I wonder if we have feverishly chased the idol of busyness, neglecting the call of the church.

As I reflect on Kreider's description of this busy lifestyle, I find myself exposed—something for which I am simultaneously guilty and grateful. My favorite analogy is this one: “We are currently experiencing the civilizational equivalent of that anxiety you feel when you have something due the next day that you haven't even started thinking about, and yet still you sit there, helplessly streaming whole seasons of mediocre TV...even as your brain screams at you to do *something*.”

If you've felt that paralyzing anxiety, you know exactly what he means. I can feel it in my body as I speak those words. We keep ourselves busy, all the while vaguely aware that our busyness itself is just another false god pulling our allegiance away from the one true God. I've come to believe that what we need is not more activity, but tools for discernment. We need time to consider our priorities. We need courage to set some things aside in order to pursue what matters most. Perhaps this space, perhaps this time, can help us sharpen those tools, cultivate those tools for discernment.

The verses you just heard from Mark are a kind of “before and after” to one of Jesus' most memorable miracles. In the first section, the disciples sound to me like card-carrying members of the cult of busy. They huddle around their leader. They are eager to give a report on all that they have done and taught. How productive and efficient they have been. How much they have gotten done. How *busy* they have kept themselves. And Jesus is *not* impressed. Rather

than congratulate them for their productivity, he senses their more basic need and invites them into a time of rest. “Come away.”

His plans that day are delayed. Mark writes next, “Now many saw them going and recognized them and hurried ahead of them. And when Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd.” So, he feeds the five thousand hungry people gathered on that hillside. Delayed but not denied, Jesus puts his disciples in a boat. He sends them away. He dismisses the crowd. He goes up the mountain, and he prays. As his disciples are carried ahead to what's next, Jesus himself exits the rushing current. He refuses the cult of busy. He steps aside. He prays.

It's not recorded here, but I have to wonder if the disciples complained. After all, Jesus has just performed his biggest miracle yet in front of thousands. It's the right moment to build his brand, to increase his popularity, to mobilize his base. He's missing a golden opportunity! *Except*, busyness is not the goal.

Many years ago, beloved pastor and author Eugene Peterson wrote a piece with the title, “The Unbusy Pastor.” The subheading is even more direct. Peterson writes, “The word busy is the symptom not of commitment but of betrayal.” Ouch. Reading these words Peterson wrote while serving as a pastor four decades ago, I recognize myself. He describes how quickly the calendar fills with activities that keep us busy without deepening our walk of faith or strengthening our relationship with Christ. Reading his words, I thought of how even the church, with the best of intentions, can prioritize busyness over these encounters with God.

In my own experience, those encounters come only when I slow down enough to recognize them, when I stop to acknowledge them, when I pause to welcome them. What if, at Second Church, our life together did not simply add items to our to do list or lengthen our obligations? What if our life together deepened our sense of God's presence? What if the spiritual discipline of Sabbath was not just another thing

to get done each week, but rather a practice that disrupts the busyness and reorients us toward what matters most?

Ever since our older son, Samuel, was a baby, Sara and I have read to the boys each night before they fall asleep. That time together is a gift we cherish. It's a time to slow down at the close of the day and just be together. Now, I believe that. I believe it with all my heart. And yet, I remember one night when Sam was about a year old. I was reading to him, and I realized that *Sam was about a year old*—that meant he didn't know the words written on the page. He didn't know the order of the story. And so, clever, I began to skip words, and then I began to skip whole pages, an effort to speed the process up a bit. I can get this book done in a matter of seconds. After all, the sooner I finished reading to Sam, the sooner I could get the kitchen clean. The sooner I could get the kitchen clean, the sooner I could get my emails answered. The sooner I could get my emails answered, the sooner I could take the trashcans out to the street. The sooner... I was proud of this discovery, this increase in margin, this added efficiency at the end of the day. But then it hit me. In my attempt to trick my infant son and rush to the next thing, I was neglecting the most important moment of the day. Now, I won't ask for a show of hands, but I hope I'm not alone. How often do you fail to cherish the holy moments while you're in them? How often do you rush right past the presence of God right in front of you?

Jesus dismissed the crowd. He climbed the mountain. He prayed. In the midst of overwhelming demand on his time, Jesus stepped away to gain perspective, to discern his next move, to simply *be* with his God. No doubt he was tempted by busyness and productivity, but he chose to rest in the presence of God.

This is how worship can shape us. Not by adding something else to the list of obligations, but by sharpening our senses over time to the presence of God in every moment so that on Thursday morning

at breakfast, you might recognize God's presence because you spent a little time in here sharpening those tools, cultivating those tools of discernment. The parent of a five-year-old told me that her daughter had announced her intention to remain in worship for the whole service. A five year old! I was proud. I was grateful until the mom said, "Well, actually, what my daughter said was this: 'Hey, Mom, I want to stay in boring church this week.'" Maybe she is describing what you need most.

I am no longer interested in filling your schedules—or mine—with religious busy work. I don't need to hear the sheepish excuses of folks who feel guilty for missing a service, a meeting, or an event. You see, what we are about here, together in the church, is not the creation of more work which must be done. Such busyness is only a mirage and an idol, making promises it cannot keep, always out of our reach. You see it in the relentless voice of consumer culture often mimicked by churches. It promises to make us productive, to make us powerful, to make us important. For if we keep you busy, we will be relevant. If you're always running, you'll never stop to wonder why.

Jesus knows a different way. He points to the purpose of prayer, the meaning of faith, the truth of the Gospel, which does not come on our schedule or all at once, but over time, through practice, in community. We need Sabbath space to discern our priorities. We need the sustaining gift of time set aside with the only true God. We need a community seeking God's will, encouraging us to slow down, dismiss the crowd, climb the mountain, say the prayer.

I'm convinced that life on this earth is too brief for anything less, that life on this earth is too sacred to be spent spinning our wheels.

So, this week, as the calendar starts to fill and the stress level begins to rise, let's seek small ways to subvert the cult of busy before it consumes us. Pause for a moment of prayer or linger long enough to listen to a stranger. Practice the courageous witness

of saying no to any activity absent of meaning. For Jesus invites us to a life of abundance. That life is offered as a gift, not a reward for getting everything else done.

This week, open your hands. Open your heart and receive this blessing. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.johnshopkinshealthreview.com/issues/spring-summer-2016/articles/the-cult-of-busy>