

## Interns for Life

It's been a while since we had a ministerial intern here at the First Presbyterian Church, but over the years, we've had several. Most demonstrated wonderful gifts for ministry, and after following me and Christy Williams around for a few months, a couple of interns decided that God was calling them to some other form of service.

One intern success story is Mary Vance, the now-retired pastor of Fellowship Presbyterian Church. And another is Megan Thorvalson, who finished seminary and then went to medical school. She's now a pediatrician at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. That's good. (She's also my daughter-in-law, which is even better.)

I enjoyed having interns. There are some drawbacks, however. Interns pay attention. They note discrepancies between one's espoused theory of ministry and one's actual practice of ministry. They listen to your prayers. They notice your body language. They take mental notes. I know this because I used to be an intern myself. By observing my supervisor, I identified, and quickly discarded, dozens of bad habits. I'm sure the interns who worked with me did the same.

A couple of weeks ago we read how Jesus dispatched a dozen of his interns to the villages of Galilee to put into practice the things they and seen Jesus do. They preached. They taught. They healed and cast out demons. All in all, the interns seem to have done a pretty good job. In today's reading from Mark's Gospel, the interns return to their supervisor to give their reports. **"The apostles gathered round Jesus,"** Mark writes, **"and told him all that they had done and taught."**

I wonder what method Jesus used to evaluate his interns' performance. I think the apostles were lucky to have lived before the days of video cameras and standardized tests. Imagine taking the Apostolic FCAT! The very notion of having Jesus as your supervisor is scary enough. I know that when I report to him each night, I pray that he's grading on the curve.

When all the reports are in, Jesus does not order the apostles to gather in break-out groups to facilitate self-reflection. Instead he proposes a vacation. **"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while,"** he tells them. Not "Try harder next time." Not "Write out your personal goals for the next six months." Not even, "Well done! Pat yourselves on the back."

No. **“Come away,”** he says. **“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves”** with no cell phone reception, no wi-fi connections, and no Apple watches to remind you of your next appointment. **“Come away . . . and rest.”**

One gets the feeling that it isn't just his interns that Jesus is worried about. Mark hints that they were all feeling the pressure of their work for God's kingdom -- including Jesus. **“For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”** When you're working that hard, day in and day out, something's wrong. Something's out of kilter. It's time to come away and rest.

Does any of this sound familiar? **“No leisure even to eat.”** The breakfast burrito bought at the drive-through is becoming the hottest-selling item in the American diet. Add to that the soft-drink guzzled down in place of the leisurely glass of morning orange juice, and you've got a recipe for a gastronomical and spiritual train wreck. Of every dollar spent on food, the average American spends 49 cents on food eaten outside the home.

Why? Because, as Mark says, we **“have no leisure.”** No time to cook. No time to think. No time to come away to a deserted place and rest.

Americans work more hours per year than almost everyone else in the so-called developed world. The French work 28% fewer hours per person than Americans and the Germans 25% fewer hours. On the average, Americans get 13 days of vacation per year, Brits 28 days, Germans 35, French 37, and Italians 42.

Back in 1967 the futurist Herman Kahn predicted that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans would enjoy 13 weeks of vacation and a four-day work week. The challenge, he predicted, would be figuring out what to do with all our free time. *Not.*

Despite all the extra hours we work, Americans are not much more productive than Europeans. Productivity wise, we're about the same. Here's the difference: Europeans use their productivity to buy more leisure. We use ours to create more wealth. And we are wealthier, if by “wealth” you mean that we have a higher GDP and more money to pay for goods and services we feel we must have.

Basically, we work longer hours to pay for the things we can't do for ourselves because we're working longer hours – things like cooking, gardening, cleaning, and taking care of our children.

All this extra work creates demand for more jobs in the service sector, but it's not making people who work at those jobs particularly wealthy. A person working at the federal minimum wage makes about \$15,800 annually, which is about \$5,000 below the federal poverty level for a family of three. Congress hasn't raised the federal minimum wage for nine years running.

None of this is likely to change until Christians begin to make different choices – until our lives reflect the priorities of God's kingdom, not merely the priorities of the culture. "The trouble with the rat race," Lily Tomlin once said, "is that even if you win, you're still a rat."

Most Presbyterians have inherited a "Puritan work ethic." We know it's important to work hard to the glory of God. What we forget is that work itself can be a kind of idol. My own father was the hardest-working pastor I've ever known. After he retired he warned me not to follow his example too closely. "All in all," he said, "I can't help but think that in the course of my ministry I went to far too many committee meetings."

Why, I wonder, do we take with such seriousness Jesus' commands to feed the poor, house the homeless, and befriend the outcast, but ignore his command to **"Come away to a deserted place . . . and rest?"** Perhaps it's because we don't trust God to be God. We don't really believe in the "God the Father Almighty." We believe in God, the Well-Intentioned-But-Badly-Organized Philanthropist who would never cope without our constant help.

If nothing else, this passage from Mark is a divine command to slow down, smell the roses, keep some kind of Sabbath. For many of us, our pace of work is more than unhealthy; it's unchristian.

But this passage does not end with a picture of Jesus and his interns hanging out on the beach, passing round a bottle of sun screen. Even Jesus' best laid plans to take it easy run headfirst into the world's deep longing for the kingdom he is ushering in. Jesus and his interns get in a boat bound for that deserted place on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, only to find an even bigger crowd waiting for them when they get there.

Jesus sighs. Literally, “he is moved in his guts.” These people won’t leave him alone because they have no where else to turn. They are, says Mark, “**like sheep without a shepherd.**” So, Jesus postpones that break and goes right back to work. He teaches the crowd and even performs another miracle – the feeding of the 5,000.

Then he gets in the boat and goes across to Gentile territory. Surely, he can get some “r and r” there. Guess what! It’s the same story at Gennesaret. No matter where Jesus goes, the sheep cry out for a shepherd.

To be very frank with you, I’m not quite sure what to make of this text. On the one hand, it invites us to go with Jesus to that deserted place where there are no distractions, that place where we can rest and be renewed. On the other hand, it leads us right back into the fray – to hungry people who need to be fed, to anxious people who need to be comforted, to broken people who need to be healed. Jesus does not rescind his invitation to come away and rest. Neither does he turn his back on sheep without a shepherd.

I cannot resolve the tension within this text, and I’m not sure we’re meant to. This text reads very much like life. Rest is holy, and God knows we need more of it, but work can be holy, too. We were created for both, and while both can bring us closer to God, both can also become idols who would like nothing better than to take God’s place.

Another term for “disciple” is “intern for life.” When we interns gather round our Supervisor to make our report, we can be confident that he will listen carefully and judge us with compassion. He sees how exhausted we are from trying to do more than mere interns should attempt, and he will say to us, “Take a break. You can’t bring in the Kingdom by yourselves. Come away and rest.” But don’t break out the sunscreen too soon. There might be a lost sheep on the side of the road on the way to that deserted place.

This much is sure: Jesus won’t abandon us to our own devices and desires. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and they know him, and he will not let them go.