

MARK 6:30–34. (EHV)

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, **“Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.”** For there were so many people coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat. They went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. But many people saw them leave and knew where they were going. They ran there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. When Jesus stepped out of the boat, he saw a large crowd. His heart went out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He began to teach them many things.

For my money, one of the top five saddest, not-explicitly-Christian songs composed in English, maybe even the saddest, is the 1974 song, “Cat’s in the Cradle,” by Harry Chapin. Chapin writes the song from the perspective of a father who consistently doesn’t have time for his son. He describes his son being born, growing up, turning ten, and graduating from college. Especially in his son’s younger years, his son looks up to him and wants to spend time with him, but he has “planes to catch and bills to pay” and “a lot to do,” so he keeps turning down his son’s requests. But in spite of all this, his son adores him and looks up to him, and keeps saying he’s going to be like his dad when he grows up.

Finally, the father retires, and one day he calls up his now-grown son and says, “I’d like to see you, if you don’t mind.” His son responds, “I’d love to, Dad, if I could find the time,” and his son goes on to describe how busy he is with his new job and his kids who have the flu.

Then the punch to the gut: “And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me: He’d grown up just like me. My boy was just like me.”

And as sad as the song already is, it’s made even sadder by the first two lines of the refrain, which consist of a children’s game played with string, a traditional baby gift used to feed a child, a nursery rhyme title, and an imaginary feature of an object in the sky: “And the cat’s in the cradle and the silver spoon, Little Boy Blue and the man in the moon.” In two lines, he powerfully and emotionally sums up everything he missed with his son because he didn’t have time for him—games, physical interaction, reading, and conversation.

What if Jesus were like that? What if he didn’t have time for us? In a way, it would be even worse than what Harry Chapin describes because, on the one hand, we all need Jesus even more than a child needs his father, and on the other hand, Jesus doesn’t need us and he is eternal. He wouldn’t say, “Man, I’m getting old and I’ve really missed out on something, so I had better rectify this before I die and it’s too late.” He wouldn’t be missing out on anything, and he’s never going to die. We would be the losers, whether we realized it or not, and that would be the end.

Thankfully, our Gospel this morning underscores that Jesus always has time for us.

Even though we heard a couple weeks ago about Jesus’s rejection at Nazareth, he was at the pinnacle of his popularity. Three weeks ago you heard about him going with Jairus to see his dying daughter, and a large crowd followed him, pressing tightly against him. This is what Jesus had to deal with almost everywhere he went.

So it was a good time to send out his apostles on their first preparatory mission trip to the surrounding Jewish villages. That would divert some attention from Jesus. But Jesus himself did

not take a break during that time. Matthew tells us that he too went to teach and preach in the Jewish towns. And even if Jesus got somewhat of a reprieve during this time with his twelve apostles preaching, teaching, casting out demons, and healing in his place, the fact that they were doing all these things in the name of Jesus meant that, when they finished, Jesus would be even more well known and people would be seeking him out even more.

Furthermore, we're told that while the apostles were out on their mission trip, or perhaps shortly before it, John the Baptist was executed by King Herod in a shameful way. John the Baptist was not only Jesus's great prophet and forerunner; he was also Jesus's relative. After John's disciples took John's body and buried it, they went and told Jesus about his death. And it was right around that time his apostles returned from their mission trip.

"The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught." Jesus has a terrible tragedy on his heart, and all of his apostles are excited to tell him *all* that they had done and taught. How long would that have taken?

It's a running joke at our seminary that all seniors at the seminary want to do is tell vicar stories. After four years in the college classroom and two years in the seminary classroom, they have finally gotten their first taste of gospel ministry during their vicar year, and they want to tell people about it. They want to tell people about their humorous mistakes. They want to tell people about the feedback they got on their sermons and Bible classes. They want to tell people about the difficult confrontation they had to have and how they survived it. They want to tell people about the difference the gospel made when they went to visit the individual or family in their home, or the sick or dying person in the hospital. They want to tell people about the beautiful ways the gospel bore fruit in the lives of those they served and what they learned from those they served. That was the apostles—only they also cast out demons and healed sick people, so they doubtless had much more interesting stories than returning vicars do. And they only had ten other men (since they had been sent out two by two) to share their stories with, and one professor—a professor who was mourning the loss of a loved one.

Yet Jesus had time for all of them. He listened to all of them. And while they were telling stories and he was listening, they kept getting interrupted. "There were so many people coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat." Jesus not only had time for his apostles; he also had time for the people who kept showing up for answers, for advice, for healing and help.

But as a man, Jesus still had his limitations, and he knew his apostles did, too. They were excited, but they were also tired, and now hungry. He was also tired and hungry, and he had not yet had a chance to properly grieve the loss of John the Baptist. So he told his disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." How appropriate! How thoughtful! So they got into a boat and sailed off across the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place.

But the picture you see on your cover depicts more what Jesus intended. It doesn't really depict what actually happened, except for perhaps a few minutes. Because as Jesus and his apostles sailed away, people saw them leaving and, Mark says, "knew where they were going." They maybe knew where they were going because they paid attention to the direction the boat was headed. But they might also have known where they were going because they might have guessed that Jesus and his apostles were seeking a break and they knew the secluded places that were available. But instead of saying, "Good for them, they need a break!", one of them started

running the maybe five to ten miles along the shore, then another, then another, and pretty soon everyone in the area caught on. John tells us that Jesus did get to go up on a hillside and sit down there with his disciples, but some from this crowd had already crashed their retreat. And it wasn't long before Jesus looked up and saw a huge crowd coming toward them. And they all wanted to see him, to listen to him, to talk to him, to spend time with him.

How would you respond? How would I?

I heard a story once, and I don't know if it's true, that Patrick Mahomes and his then-girlfriend showed up at one of his favorite restaurants in Kansas City one night, and of course, everyone sitting at the other tables knew it was him. But even though they glanced his way and took note that he was there, no one approached him to say hi or to ask for his autograph. They let him and his girlfriend enjoy their meal in peace. When he finished and was about to leave, he supposedly turned around and said something like, "This is why I love Kansas City. Thank you all for a wonderful night!" and everyone found out that he had paid for all of their meals. Again, I don't know if it's true, but if it is, why was Patrick Mahomes so grateful and generous? It's because all the people at the restaurant that night followed the unwritten rules: There is a time to say hi to a celebrity and ask for an autograph, and there's a time to just leave him alone and let him enjoy a meal, and clearly this was a time for the second.

Wasn't this clearly a time to leave Jesus and his apostles alone?

If Patrick Mahomes had been bombarded by a stream of people wanting to say hi and ask for his autograph, do you think he would have been as generous? I doubt it. In fact, none of us would be surprised if he blew up or left the restaurant in a huff. What if my wife and daughter and I arrived at our National Forest cabin in Montana a few weeks ago, and when we unlocked the door and opened it, there you all were? "Surprise!" How would I have reacted?

But Jesus didn't see people trying to ruin his retreat. "He saw a large crowd. His heart went out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He began to teach them many things." Jesus had time for his apostles. He had time for the people who were interrupting him. And now he had time for the people who crashed his retreat. They didn't have anyone else to go to. They were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed, helpless, clueless, in need. Jesus could help them. Jesus could teach them. So he did.

Jesus always had time for people.

And that was then, when Jesus was in his state of humiliation, willingly subject to the limitations of his human nature. If that was the case then, what about now, when he has once again taken up the full and continual use of his divine power and majesty as God? What about now, when he now neither slumbers nor sleeps? When all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him? When thousands upon thousands of angels attend on him? When he rules over everything for the good of the Church?

Brothers and sisters, Jesus always has time for you.

He always has time to teach you, through his Spirit, in his Word. When you crack your Bible or your devotional booklet or magazine, he doesn't say, "I don't have time to enlighten you right now, so you're going to have to read this like an infant would, and the words will mean nothing to you." No, when we read and listen to his word, he sends his Spirit to give us understanding and to strengthen our faith.

He always has time to listen to you in prayer. He never says, “Do you know how many other people are praying to me right now? How many other people are dying? How much bigger their problems are? How much I’m dealing with right now? Who cares about your trip? Who cares about your illness? Who cares about the drama with your friends or classmates or at work? Who cares about your diagnosis?” None of that. He always cares. He always listens. He always answers in the way that is best. He listens to your prayers as if it were just you and him alone in the room with nothing else going on in the universe.

He always has time to forgive you. He never says, “I’ve already forgiven you how many times and you’re not learning how destructive that sin is and how to flee it? I’m wasting my grace on you.” No, he does the same thing he told Peter to do. He forgives us as often as we are sorry for our wrongs and ask him to forgive us.

He also makes time to instruct, advise, listen, and forgive through the public ministers he has called and sent to serve you. Make use of them. On the one hand, this account confronts me with my sins and reminds me why I need forgiveness like everyone else. I don’t always make time for people like I should. On the other hand, this account is reminding me why, for instance, I try to make it a point not to silence my phone at night. If you truly need pastoral care at 2:30 in the morning, I’ve got the time for you, because Jesus, whom I represent, always has the time for you.

This is one of the reasons Isaiah calls Jesus “Everlasting Father” (Isa. 9:6). It isn’t that Isaiah was confused about who is the Father and who is the Son. It’s because Jesus is always a father in his attitude toward us and in his care for us. He’s not the father who always seems to have planes to catch and bills to pay and a lot to do. Jesus of course does have a ton to do every day, but that never means that he has to turn us away or ignore us. He doesn’t miss a single day of our lives.

Jesus always has time for you. Amen.