

Come Away! (II Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56)

I don't remember ever hearing my grandmother or my parents talk about stress or being stressed. But stress is certainly a common topic now, isn't it? Whatever our age, whatever our economic level, whatever our educational level, whether we live alone or surrounded by extended family, whether we work outside the home, inside the home, or are retired, we all have stress.

According to *Wikipedia*, the term "stress" was first used by the endocrinologist Hans Selye in the 1930s to identify physiological responses in laboratory animals. When he exposed rats and other animals to unpleasant or harmful stimuli, he noticed that all the animals showed alarm, then resistance, and finally exhaustion. He later broadened his findings to humans and made popular the idea of stress in the challenges of everyday living.

The term stress has now come to mean any difficulty in life--difficulty that comes from studying, money, work, family, low self-esteem, news, so on and so forth. It displays itself as mild irritation to a real breakdown in health. Some stress can be positive in that it can help humans achieve and meet goals. But other stress can cause poor judgment, a general negative outlook, excessive worrying, moodiness, irritability, agitation, inability to relax, feeling overwhelmed, feeling lonely or isolated, depression, aches and pains, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, dizziness, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, eating too much or not enough, sleeping too much or not enough, withdrawing from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs as escape, and such nervous habits as nail biting and pacing. Illnesses associated with severe stress include ulcers, depression, diabetes, trouble with the digestive system or even cardiovascular problems, along with other mental illnesses.¹

Ah, but Jesus is called the *Great Physician*, right? He's concerned about our health, our wholeness, our salvation. And so, in our gospel lesson for today, he shows us how we are to deal with the stress in our lives.

¹ "Stress," Wikipedia

Jesus' disciples had just returned from the first mission on which he had sent them. No doubt they had experienced joys as well as disappointments in their travels. Some doors had been opened to them, while other doors had been slammed in their faces. They'd been following Jesus for some time at this point and surely missed their families and the comforts of just being home. They were worn out, exhausted, even hungry. The gospel writer Mark explained that they had "had no leisure even to eat." And so the first thing Jesus did to help them with the stress they were experiencing was to tell them to "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

But before the disciples could get the rest they needed, the crowds caught up with them. And so Jesus illustrated for them another way to handle their stress. He showed them that they were to stop focusing on themselves and focus on those around them. According to Mark, even though Jesus was no doubt stressed himself, he looked at the crowds, and "He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."

As it grew late, the disciples, though, were feeling more and more "fit to be tied," more and more stressed. They showed the irritation and anger associated with stress. They told Jesus to send the people away to find something for themselves to eat! But Jesus said "You give them something to eat." And, of course, we all know what happened next. Jesus identified and then took the meager resources at hand, five loaves of bread and the two fish, asked God to bless the food, and thus was able to feed all 5,000 persons in the crowd.

At this point, after satisfying the spiritual and physical needs of the people, Jesus once again sent his grumbling, stressed disciples off to rest. Jesus himself demonstrates a third way of handling stress: instead of going with the others, Jesus "came away" by himself to a mountain to pray.

Throughout the night, the disciples stayed together and continued to be stressed. Apparently they were in such turmoil that they couldn't get across the lake. Isn't that the way it is? Once we're upset, one thing after another seems to happen. Once we're upset, seems like we can't do anything right. Thus the Gospel Writer Mark recorded that they were "straining at the oars

against an adverse wind." What a great way to describe stress, right? "Straining at the oars against an adverse wind!"

But, remember, Jesus had "gone away" by himself--to rest and to pray. And so, early the next morning, unlike his disciples, Jesus was unstressed, refreshed. In fact, Jesus was so refreshed--that he could "walk on water!" Thus Jesus walked to his still-stressed disciples struggling in the boat. He told them to not be afraid, to not be so stressed. Nowadays he would have told them "to chill." He wanted to calm them, as he had calmed the wind.

But apparently they continued to be stressed, for as scripture says, "their hearts were hardened." Jesus, God, others, no one could penetrate their hard hearts! They were still only concerned about their own stress, focused on themselves. I can just imagine their grumbling and complaining about how bad everything was for them, how insensitive others were, so on and so forth. For they hadn't paid attention to the visual parable Jesus had just shown them for dealing with their stress. Now let's us, however, do what they failed to do. Let's us reflect on the visual parable in today's gospel lesson, for the passage is full of advice about handling our stress. The passage has at least seven suggestions for handling our stress.

First, getting away to rest is essential to dealing with stress. We Americans do not get the 8-9 hours of sleep each night that our parents and grandparents did. Furthermore, we use to have Sundays when no one had to work and when stores were closed--we had Sundays to rest. Rest is important. At creation, God himself rested on the seventh day. A story is told about some African workers who were hired to carry heavy equipment on their backs to a remote outpost. It was a place that couldn't be reached any other way but on foot. After several days of difficult travel, the workers refused to pick up their packs and go any further. They sat by the side of the trail, ignoring the shouts of the leader of the expedition. Finally the leader asked why they wouldn't go on. One of the workers replied, "Sir, we are waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies."

Second, escapism is not helpful in dealing with stress. The disciples wanted to send the crowds away. The disciples wanted to escape from the people. Today we too try to escape from the pressures we feel. And how sad it is

that many try to escape by turning our backs on relationships or by using divorce or drugs or alcohol or sex or denial.

Third, in dealing with our stress, it's helpful to open our eyes and ears to those around us--to focus on someone other than ourselves--to feel compassion for someone else. And when do this, wonder of wonders, we'll find ourselves blessed with the calming presence of our Lord himself. The insightful writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "You will have found Christ when you are concerned with other people's sufferings and not your own."

But it is not enough simply to see the suffering of others, we need to do something about it. Thus, fourth, to act on the compassion we feel, to do something to help those in need, it's important for us to identify the resources we have at hand. When we stop and do this, we may be surprised to find that we do have resources at hand.

Fifth, we need to ask God to help us make the best use possible of the resources available to us. Dewitt Jones told about a photographer who walked down the street one day and came upon a man who was choking. "What a picture," he thought. "This says it all: a man, alone, in need. What a message!" So the photographer reached for his camera and began to adjust the light meter, and all the while, the poor man who was choking realized that help was not forthcoming. He grabbed the photographer's arm and gasped, "I'm turning blue!" "That's all right," said the photographer, patting the man's hand. "I'm shooting color film." The photographer had the resources at hand to help the man, but he didn't ask God to help him use his mind and his hands properly to save the man's life.

Sixth, regularly getting away by ourselves to spend time alone with God is essential to dealing with stress. Michael Faraday, an early pioneer of electromagnetic current, once addressed a gathering of scientists. For an hour, Faraday held the audience spellbound with his lecture on the nature of the magnet. When his lecture was over, he received a thundering ovation. When the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, stood to congratulate him, the applause began all over again. But suddenly the applause stopped, as everyone realized that Faraday had left. You see, it was time for a mid-week prayer service in the little church of which Faraday was a member. So Faraday turned his back on his worldly king in order to spend an hour with the King of Kings. Spending time with God is the only way that we can really

know God. There's a difference between knowing about God and actually knowing God. For example, a distinguished actor and a retired minister were once together at some social event. When the actor was asked to do a reading, he recited the Twenty-Third Psalm with such eloquence that everyone felt a sense of awe. Then he invited the retired minister to recite the psalm. The minister spoke with tenderness and understanding. When he finished, all eyes were filled with tears. Turning to the minister, the actor said, "I know the psalm, but you, sir, know the Shepherd."

Seventh, today's gospel passage makes it clear that, if we know God and his love for us and his power, we have every reason to expect miracles such as the feeding of the 5,000. We have every reason to expect that things will work out. We should therefore be as hopeful as were two fortune hunters named Sam and Jed. They learned that up in Canada, \$5,000 was being offered for each wolf captured alive. So, they traveled to an isolated region of Canada and began looking for their valuable prey. One night they were exhausted and fell asleep in their little tent. A few hours later, Sam awoke suddenly to see that they were surrounded by about 50 snarling, vicious wolves. But Sam wasn't stressed at all. Instead, he nudged his friend and said, "Wake up, Jed, we're rich, man! We're rich!" What an attitude of expectancy!

This past Friday I "came away." I spent the day at a monastery in Atchison, Kansas. I had time to pray with the members of the community, and I was blessed by a talk on prayer given by a visiting abbot. Abbot Jerome Kodell talked about two terms called the foreground and the background. He said that we live most of our lives in the world--in the foreground; it's what's most visible. It's in this foreground that we're bombarded with demands on our lives and bombarded with all kinds of communications and noise. With 24-hour networks like CNN always showing us images of violence and talking about things we have to worry about, we're constantly in a state of restlessness and thus hopelessness. It's when we allow our lives to be dominated by this foreground that we're stressed. Those whose lives are dominated by the foreground are shattered when things like 9/11 and the stock market crash occur; whereas, those whose lives are dominated by the background are not.

The seven points lifted up by today's scripture passage build up the

background in our lives. When we rest, when we look with God's compassion on others, when we focus on the resources we have, when we ask God to help us use wisely and bless these resources, and when we spend time with God, we build up our background. If we build up our background to the point that it begins to dominate our lives, we will find that our stress has greatly lessened and perhaps even disappeared. And guess what? In doing the things that build up the background, we're also obeying what Jesus said were the two greatest commandments--loving God and loving others--loving God so much that we spend time with him--loving others so much that we compassionately help them.

Friends, our God loves us. He wants us to know his peace. He invites us to "come away"--to come away from the frantic, stressful foreground living of this world to the compassionate, hopeful, peaceful background living of his kingdom. May we hear God's invitation, and may we accept it. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; July 19, 2009