My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Last week we heard about the death of John the Baptist and how it’s instructive to us that we hear the whole story, not just part of the story, so that our hearts may come to more honest appraisals of circumstances in out lives. That’s vitally important. But from a Bible text standpoint, it interrupts the narrative of Jesus having no power in his hometown of Nazareth, the disciples given the authority to teach and heal, and their departure.

This week they return. And interestingly, for the first time in Mark’s Gospel, they are now called apostles, not disciples. Do we know the difference between the two? What is it (take all answers). A disciple is a student, one who learns from a teacher, and that’s what’s been happening, right they’ve been listening a lot. But an apostle a messenger, sent to deliver the teachings to others. "Apostle" means messenger, one who is sent.

This is a moment when the disciples’ status changes, too, in that their preaching is now done in the name of the one who sent them: Jesus, who is **God with us**. And they must have been both exhausted and excited from their efforts, because the crowds that sought Jesus are probably now also seeking them out, too, so much so that our text says they didn’t even have a chance to eat.

And it’s not the crowds’ fault per se. They are really positive about Jesus, without any ill-will, wrong motives, or a herd mentality. They anticipate Jesus’ destinations and run ahead on foot from all the towns just to see him. They arrive ahead of him and stay with him until a late hour. The crowds are everywhere, all the time.

We’ve seen that, haven’t we? Where someone is so swamped by folks who want to speak to them they don’t get a break. An author at a book-signing. A musician at a rock concert. A politician at a campaign stop or a parade. A defendant at a high profile trial. An athlete after winning an event. A grieving spouse at a memorial wake. In the everyday, the flashy, the celebration, and the grief event, we do this to people unwittingly and unknowingly.

We want to say our piece or be heard, almost any way we can, not really ever thinking about putting ourselves in the other person’s shoes of what it is like to have the attention whether it’s curiosity or genuine care.

But let’s put ourselves in the shoes of the recipient of all of the attention. As the hours turn into days and into weeks and months of constant crowds, it’s an effort nonetheless to not only keep it together, but also to respond with interest and grace. It’s no wonder Jesus suggests that they go away by themselves to a quiet place to rest, a solitary place.

There is a time for every purpose under heaven, says Ecclesiastes, and even rest if required. We learn this early on in the Bible, don’t we? Where do we first learn of rest? (Genesis, day 7). Right. God not only rested from all the work, but made it holy, right there in Genesis, and reinforced that when God gave the Ten Commandments. Keep the Sabbath holy.

But this isn’t a sermon about Sabbath. Yet we should be able to know that God allows us to rest from our labors, look around, and see what we have done and created. We have the right to withdraw from attentions of the people around us and the world and just take a day off to go row a boat on the lake, or read a book in our chair, or whatever gives our minds, bodies, and spirits rest. But it’s hard to do that, isn’t it?

We have these things called mobile phones that keep us connected, which is great, but it also makes us available at all hours of the day and night. That’s the expectation at least. We expect folks to pick up and talk to us, ‘cuz it’s convenient for US at that time to do so. You ever wonder if it’s convenient for the person you’re calling to TAKE your call? Do we ever ask? OK, good, there’s still hope for civility, but a good number of us just get right into it and talk about what WE want, what will YOU do for me, when and how can you get this thing done? As urgent as our stuff is, think about how it must feel to be the church moderator, or steward, or clerk, or any number of folks who have their sleeves tugged at all the wrong times, but who need to respond with interest and grace to the unrelenting wants of the crowd?

Sometimes, as much as we need to engage to get stuff done, we need to withdrawal to be able to figure things out again, to remember life’s purpose of non-performance, non-ego pursuits, and not accomplishing or initiating anything. If we were an apostle in Jesus’ time, we don’t need to teach or heal all the time in order to be “worthy”—our lives are not a contest to see who can heal the most folks, convert the most souls, or teach the most people. Life in the Kingdom of God requires balance, doesn’t it? We have to remember to forget the stifling restrictions we’ve put on ourselves, and learn also that each time, age, and place will dictate our efforts.

And we also have to re-engage, too, and remember that just as engagement is not a permanent condition, neither is withdrawal. When we engage again, and with one another, we engage in what my friend Brian McLaren says is the Body of Christ. Rest allows us to find a new approach, make a new road, pioneer a new way of living as neighbors in one human community, as brothers and sisters in one family of creation. We need to prepare ourselves, as we re-open and re-introduce ourselves to Greenland, that we are not only the Church that has always been here but that we are also the vessel that carries the collective joys, griefs, burdens, and blessings that have been not only in our faith community, but in our wider community. It’s why we are called the ***Community*** Congregational Church. But to get there…and to go there…this brief respite the pandemic has given us requires withdrawal and contemplation of who we are and where we not just able, but called, to go.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. Rest allows us to truly see one another and how we all contribute to our common mission.

That’s why the apostle Paul repeatedly describes how in Christ we see humanity as one body and our differences as gifts, not threats, to one another. Paul came to realize that people aren’t different because they’re trying to be difficult or evil—they’re different because the Spirit has given them differing gifts.

We have a new banner in front of the church, and you might have noticed it. What does it say? (Join our Community – meet new people, make new friends, come and see). It’s an invitation, for sure. What does it mean?

Through our Church, in this Body of Christ, God calls us to a new way of living, a new way of relating to God, to others, and to the world. Paul believed the Church is meant to be a community whose way of living runs contrary to the prevailing culture. We would call that way or living countercultural. It is a way of cooperating rather than competing, a way of giving rather than getting, a way of sharing rather than hoarding, a way of sacrifice rather than comfort, a way of faith rather than knowledge, a way of relationship rather than anonymity, a way of love rather than animosity. Through membership in the Body of Christ, this way of living is a sharing in the life of Christ.

More than ever before in our history, we need a new kind of personal and social fuel. Not fear, but love. Not prejudice, but openness. Not supremacy, but service. Not inferiority, but equality. Not resentment, but reconciliation. Not isolation, but connection. Not the spirit of hostility, but the holy Spirit of hospitality.

Enjoy your rest this summer. Let’s soon be ready to engage in amazing ways. Thanks be to God, Amen.