

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last Sunday's sermon, based on the Gospel text for that day, was couched in the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, which was, admittedly, a gory and gruesome topic, and a topic outside the realm of my own personal knowledge, except for the viewing of medieval and classical paintings of that terrible scene.

Yes, if you haven't noticed, I still have my head and I have never witnessed the beheading of another person, for which I am most thankful, though sadly the videos of the beheadings of Western captives by ISIL have been widely aired. I simply choose not to see such an ugly and evil thing.

As to today's Gospel and sermon, I can report that I have personal experience in great abundance! As we heard, Jesus is saying, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). As you may know, in recent weeks, rest has been a primary activity for me!

Here's my story, of late and in brief, in case you haven't heard: Back in May, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and, after considering options and much prayer, I chose to have surgery. On June 9th, at IU North Hospital, I had my prostate removed, along with my pelvic lymph nodes.

Even though I left the hospital the very next day, I did so with a catheter in place and a drainage tube in my left side – and, believe me, I was very much still a "post-operative patient" – just not in the hospital anymore.

What did I do at home after surgery? I rested. I took short walks. I rested. I read your get-well cards and was thankful to have received them. I read magazines and a book; and I watched TV. I rested some more. I grumped and groaned, and I rested even more.

Finally, nine days after my surgery, on June 18th, I had a check-up at the surgeon's office. But much to my disappointment, it was determined that I had not yet had sufficient healing to have those tubes removed.

I was told to come back; come back eight days later, on June 26th. Eight more days of those annoying and bothersome tubes! More short walks, more reading and television, and more rest! More grumping and groaning! More rest!

But as much as I may know through recent personal experience about rest, we'll be far better served listening to what Scripture and Jesus have to say about this topic.

My own personal words about rest are puny and pale in comparison to what "the Word" has to say on this topic, which, by the way, is considerable and worthy of our attention. In fact, at the very start of the Scriptures, "rest" is presented as an important feature of earthly existence.

Likely you know that Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, begins with not one, but two accounts of creation. And in the conclusion of that first creation account, it is written,

“And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Genesis 2:2-3).

How important is rest? Well, important enough for God to do it! God rested from the work of creation, and God blessed and made holy a time set aside for rest! And those would want to restrict rest to being therefore only a divine activity have only to read into the second book of Scripture.

There, in Exodus, in the words and ordinances which God gives to his people through Moses, we find this command. It's not a suggestion; it's not a recommendation; it's a command: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest ...” (Exodus 23:12). Rest isn't just for God; we are meant to rest.

Clearly, we are meant to observe a regular pattern of work and rest. And without such a pattern of work and regular rest we are at risk of mental, emotional, and physical depletion; of stress-related exhaustion;

of general poor health; and even of serious illness, and perhaps even premature death.

Many of us have heard the old line, “That poor soul worked himself to death!” Come to find out, there may be more truth to that for some people than we would like to admit! Rest is refreshing, renewing, restorative, and regenerative. Rest is a necessity for the human body, mind, and spirit.

Is it possible to get too much rest? Of course – resting too much moves one over into another category: that of the passive couch potato! Resting without sufficient body movement, and mental and physical exercise, results in laziness and indolence. This is one of the seven deadly sins: sloth.

That being said, most modern surveys indicate that many Americans work too much, often not even using all the vacation days available to them. And recent surveys indicate that many Americans are sleep-deprived, denying themselves of much-needed rest.

The key is to have that good balance between meaningful work and genuine rest. And remember: rest doesn't always have to mean no physical activity. A leisurely walk in the woods, soaking in the beauty of nature, can be quite restful, rejuvenating, and healing.

We need to constantly self-monitor our physical, emotional, and mental health.

And when fatigue is detected, and when rest is clearly indicated, then we need to rest – there is simply no alternative to life-restoring and life-giving rest!

Of late, my time with my little grand-daughter, Josie, has been limited, due to my surgery and recovery. But prior to that, I was noticing that Josie was more often fighting against sleep, and seeking to avoid or delay her naps.

At her young age, almost everything is new and exciting, and she has many interesting and stimulating toys that capture her attention and imagination. With all that's available and going on around her, why should Josie want to sleep, even though she's rubbing her eyes and clearly sleep would be best?

I share this little family story because many of us are a lot like Josie! We all need our rest, but some of us too often allow other things to distract us and to deprive us of the rest which is so beneficial and restorative.

“I went to bed early, knowing I was tired and that I hadn't slept all that well the night before” said the woman, “but then I picked up my book and started reading – and before I knew it, it was past midnight!”

Recommendations: don't read in bed; or, if you do, set a timer, or an alarm, so that you still get a good night's rest! Some people are habituated to their electronic devices, and they use them from when they arise to when they go to bed at night – and sometimes even after that!

One problem is the cognitive stimulation caused by watching TV or being on the internet; by texting or e-mailing; by using one's Smartphone or playing video games. These may seem like quiet, passive activities, but scientists have learned they are not at all restful.

In addition, the glow of such devices negatively affects the area of the brain controlling sleep activity. The result is the delay of the release of the sleep-inducing hormone, melatonin.

Recommendations: Stop using all electronic devices at least a half hour before bedtime. Make the bedroom and technology-free zone reserved for good sleep and proper rest.

Finally, a quick word about the specifics of Jesus' command: Jesus didn't just say, “Come away and rest a while.” He said, “Come away *to a deserted place* ...” (Mark 6:31). Our “getting away from it all” should be just that!

A ‘deserted place’ suggests a place without intense and heavy stimulation, a place of quietness and peace. We all need to be in such places from time to time.

No, this doesn't mean you should never take a physically-strenuous vacation in which you are highly active, but it does mean that you may have to rest when you get home from such a trip – and it does mean you should allow yourself the time to do exactly that!

Jesus didn't just say, "Come away and rest a while." Jesus said, "Come away to a deserted place *all by yourselves* and rest a while" (Mark 6:31).

If you enjoy travelling with friends, or family, by all means you should do that. If you are a grandparent, and you want to travel or vacation with your children and grandchildren, by all means you should do that.

Neither of those scenarios, however, will be as restful as if you were "all by yourselves." Even if your venue is "all-inclusive," even if all meals and housekeeping are provided, such a trip or vacation will not be quite as restful as if you were "all by yourselves."

Whenever you are with others, relational skills are demanded, and, no, it's just not quite as restful as when you are "all by yourselves." Yes, Jesus knew what he was talking about: there's a lot to be said for peaceful solitude. Not all the time; but sometimes, it's best to be alone, and at rest. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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