

## Slap Out

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 2, 2024  
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

*A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. (Mark 1:35-45, NRSV)*

Back in the day, when I was a much younger minister, I started with one church to work primarily with the youth group. After I settled in, I started reaching out to the teenagers' families, asking if their kids were available for an afternoon bible study I hoped to organize. One mother, a really lovely person, made quite an impression, though she was hardly unique. Standing in my office, she pulled out her pocket calendar – this was a day before smart phones! – and turned page after page. She finally looked up and said, "My daughter has a 45-minute opening two and half weeks from now. The rest of the time it's gymnastics, piano, and voice lessons. She's just ... so busy."

That was over 20 years ago, but as they say, the more things change, the more they stay the same. I talked with an old friend on the phone just a few weeks ago, at the end of April. I asked him how he was doing, how his family was. He hesitated, his voice lowered, and he just whimpered: "I'm so busy... I am so busy ... there's so much going on."

I seriously doubt that these examples are exceptional. If all this busyness resulted in greater productivity and satisfaction, then maybe it would all be OK. But it doesn't ... and isn't. The problem is that the longer we go on like this, the less connected we are to what we're doing – to the point that our *doing* is all we have ... that there's nothing left *inside* – inside, where the heart is.

There's a small community not far from where I grew up in Alabama with a funny story behind its name. It's a little place (population 4,096) called Holtville – or at least that's what it's *officially* called. That's not what the locals call it. People in or around the area call it "Slap-out" – Slap-out, Alabama. (Why are you not shocked that there is such a place in Alabama? ☺). It

apparently got this name in the early part of the 20th century, because the sorry excuse for a general store that was there in the 1920s was always – wait for it – "'slap out' of everything." Whenever someone came in and asked the store owner for something he didn't have (which was apparently often), he would answer, "I'm slap out."

People today are intimately acquainted with staying busy. With all our gadgets and time-saving tools, we should be the happiest, most productive people on Earth. And yet, we're not. We're just not. So many struggle with emptiness inside, burned out – compelled to keep on going, but pretty close to "slap out" of inspiration ... "slap out" of motivation ... "slap out" of time for real human contact.

What happened to a world in which we can sit with the people we love the most and have slow conversations about the state of our heart and soul, conversations that slowly unfold, conversations with pregnant pauses and silences that we are in no rush to fill? How did we create a world in which we have more and more to do with less time for leisure, less time for reflection, less time for community, less time to just ... *be*? A world in which we are so busy making a living that we miss out on those things that make life worth living.

You know, going back to the gospel reading for today, you get the sense that Jesus had to deal with this sort of thing too! Recall how the passage begins: with Jesus going out early in the morning, out to a deserted place, to pray in solitude. We are not told how long he's gone, but apparently it's long enough for his disciples to feel the urgent need to go "hunting" for him because, as they put it, "Everyone is searching for you."

Now, at least in this case, Jesus seems to have had a good attitude about being interrupted – fully accepting that it's time to go to work, so to speak. But then he's almost immediately rewarded for his dutifulness with a desperate leper – a leper who upon being healed doesn't just do *the one, simple thing* Jesus asks of him, but instead spreads the word far and wide, such that Jesus' harried-ness goes from bad to worse! The passage ends by telling us that Jesus could no longer even go into a new town openly, but had to stay out in the country, with people coming to him from everywhere.

Now, twenty centuries later, it's easy to understand where Jesus is coming from – much easier to understand than we would like! Our whole world is still full of pressing, urgent concerns ... some artificial, life-draining, and of our own making, and some all-too-real and crying out from places of pain and suffering. But in this time, some are waking up to the gospel call to make intentional time for silence, for reflection, for meditation, for prayer, that they may be fully equipped to face those challenges.

Putting us in vital touch with the Source of our being, such inner solitude re-fills us with the Love in which we live and yet from which we can come to feel so disconnected. It can help us come back home to our own lives with fresh eyes, that we might set new boundaries, new priorities. It can help us establish new rhythms of life and work – rhythms which can re-enchant our world and release reservoirs of meaning, creativity, and imagination.

What does this mean in our own lives? I'm sure it means cutting some things *out* ... things that are unhelpful, unhealthy ... distractions that cause us to fritter away energies we can use better elsewhere. And surely it means being intentional about bringing something good into our daily living and being more thoughtful about the way we use our time.

Perhaps it simply means taking even ten minutes in the morning, in solitude, quiet reflection and prayer, before we get moving for the day ... and ten minutes at day's end, offering up the day's troubles and unfinished business. Maybe it means regular walks in the park or in the country, taking in the quiet and glorying in God's beautiful creation. Perhaps it means joining an intercessory prayer group. There are many different practices available to us. But the great thing that all of these have in common is that they carve out intentional space in the midst of our busy lives to re-focus and offer ourselves anew to the refreshing winds of the Spirit, that we might then carry that refreshment and healing to others.

Jesus had to take the time to be alone in the Divine Presence – that solitary place in which he could encounter again and again the infinite, creative Source of his life and energy. He was in that interior space when he went out into the wilderness for those 40 days before beginning his public ministry. It equipped him with the strength and vision to declare the coming of the Kingdom. With the weight of the world's needs pressing in, it was a space he needed to re-enter again and again. And as it was for him, so it is with us.

The great Catholic contemplative Thomas Merton, too, intimately knew the lostness that we may often feel. He too knew the *need* for God which we become aware of when we slow down long enough to allow ourselves to feel it. But he also knew where to turn ... He knew the One to whom to offer his blindness and confusion. One of his more famous prayers expresses the intention of my own heart, and I offer it to you for your own journey, especially when you're "slap out" of inspiration ... "slap out" of confidence ... "slap out" of what to do next:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

May this be our prayer too – to the glory of God. Amen.