

Rest a While  
Exodus 20:8-11 and Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

During the week, I pretty much listen exclusively to NPR as I commute to work and travel throughout town. But on the weekends, I like to listen to satellite radio – especially the 80s and 70s stations – because they play a countdown of the top 40 hits from this week in...whatever year they randomly designate for this particular weekend. On the 80s station, the original VJs from the early days of MTV take turns announcing the songs and sharing certain behind-the-scenes type introductions along the way.

However, on the 70s station, they play reruns of actual original broadcasts of “America’s Top 40,” starring none other than Casey Kasem himself. Yes, the golden voice of Casey Kasem – a voice he shared with the goofy but loveable Shaggy of Scooby Doo fame – plays on loop throughout each and every weekend.

Recently they re-broadcast a show from 1974 and Kasem announced that he was going to play a clip from an actual commercial record recorded in the 1950s. There were two seconds of silence. He teased: “want to hear it again?” Two more seconds of silence.

Kasem goes on to say:

“Two CBS engineers named Hamilton O’Hara and Don Foster once tried to turn silence into a gold record with the 1953 single, “Three Minutes of Silence.” Pop critics gave it rave reviews, tongue-in-cheek of course...Whenever a customer wanted relief from music blaring from the jukebox, all he had to do was drop in a coin, press the buttons for “Three Minutes of Silence” – and that’s what he’d get. Now, the record never made the chart, probably because it didn’t get much airplay...but lots of stations got requests for it. An oddity in the world of popular music...it took the engineers only three takes to get it right.”

Three minutes of silence. We want a break from the noise and the din of the malt shop so badly that we are willing to spend money – our hard-earned quarters – to get three minutes of silence.

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Perhaps O’Hara and Foster (the men behind the record) were inspired by the work of composer John Cage whose piece entitled “4’33”” premiered in August of 1952. The composer’s piece was performed in three movements. For the first, pianist David Tudor “starts a stopwatch, sits down in front of the piano, closes the lid and begins a performance in which he never plays a note. After 30 seconds of silence, Tudor resets the stopwatch and times another two minutes, 23 seconds of silence, then another one minute, 40 seconds of silence.” (NPR, The Story of ‘4’33”, May 8, 2000)

“The silence of the piano did not leave the audience in silence. They made their own music by their whispers that grew louder as they wondered what was going on. Some of them got up and walked out. Others shuffled in their seat, anticipating that the pianist would play something.” (Cynthia Collins, John Cage 4’33” Music or Silence?, May 15, 2015)

But had one been still and listened intently that night, “one could likely hear the sound of the breeze in the trees, rain pattering lightly on the rooftop, the chirping of crickets, a dog barking aimlessly somewhere in the distance, the sound of bodies shifting their weight on creaky pine benches, the sound of breath being drawn and being expired.” (NPR)

That was truly music for John Cage. Though people thought his composition was a joke, it actually was no joke at all. It was intended to allow folks to have the opportunity to sit and listen to the beauty of the world's sounds.

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How often do we do that? Just sit and listen...just be still and wait...just be patient and relish even the simplest of experiences and the quietest of moments?

In my mind? Not nearly often enough.

And this has been the case for a very long time. Even Jesus' disciples didn't have time to eat! In our gospel text for this morning we read that the disciples had been working hard for a long time and were in serious need of a break...a Sabbath. Jesus encouraged them to take that much needed pause. Jesus says: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Jesus knew the importance of taking a much needed break – even if it were brief. He spent some time alone in the wilderness occasionally. He knew how it fed his soul to spend some time in prayer by himself. He knew the importance of withdrawing and tending to your own needs, so you could return to your work rejuvenated.

Certainly, Jesus and his disciples didn't have a lot of time for a respite. Just as soon as they crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a crowd had gathered and was waiting to meet them there – for healing, for a blessing, to hear a story from the master parable teller. They didn't have a lot of time. But Jesus insisted the disciples rest while they could.

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Shouldn't Jesus' advice and example be for us, as well? Shouldn't we take time out for rest and rejuvenation and even simple nourishment?

Of course, we should! It's just easier said than done...right?!?

Composer John Cage wanted his audience to sit still and take a breather. Instead they got angry and stormed out.

When we get an opportunity to slow down and rest, sometimes it is difficult to embrace it. Perhaps we think we are too important – that the world can't live without us for a moment. Or maybe we are afraid the world will pass us by while we take a short break, and we might get left behind or forgotten.

But we know that even Jesus took a vacation every now and then...and the world hasn't forgotten about him!

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As Cynthia Collins writes in an article about John Cage's 4'33" piece:

"Conventional music has rests as part of the music. If those rests did not exist, there would be no place for singers to breathe, no variety in the combination of instruments heard during a symphony orchestra or band concert, and no place in the music for a pause as part of the rhythm. But when a musician sees a rest in the score, that rest is still part of the composition and is a valid part of the overall work."

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Rest is a valid part of work. Jesus tells us “rest a while.” But it is hard for us to rest.

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Sometimes it is hard for us even to slow down – to enjoy a slower pace.

If you haven’t already watched the new documentary about Mr. Rogers entitled “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?,” I highly recommend you do so. It is a well-done tribute to the special man and his powerful TV “ministry” with children and adults. Though it might not seem possible, I walked out of the theatre a bigger fan than I was going in.

One of things Mr. Rogers is best known for was the pace of his program. As compared to the energy and excitement of other television programs for children, such as “Sesame Street” and “The Electric Company,” “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” was in a category all its own. The pace was slow...almost laughingly slow...in fact, the pace was fodder for a lot of comedians and their jokes.

But one point the documentary made was that the “show operated in slow time, but...did not waste time.” Mr. Rogers took the time necessary to feed his fish. He once set a timer for one minute, and waited patiently for it to expire, to demonstrate a minute’s length to his audience of children. Mr. Rogers was not in a hurry. But neither was he dull or boring. He was just...s.l.o.w.

Slow time. Not wasted time.

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Perhaps we should all slow down, as well. Perhaps we are just so eager to do, accomplish, excel, repeat, that we lose out on the importance of rest, silence, reflection, a slower pace. Perhaps we should follow the example of God the Creator and Jesus the Christ and take time for renewal and rejuvenation. Perhaps we should learn about the importance of self-care, so that we can return to our responsibilities at a later time better able to do our work and meet our obligations...including obligations to ourselves, such as taking time to eat.

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John Cage considered “4’33”” to be his most important piece, and he meditated upon it before writing any other compositions. He wrote: “I’ve spent many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece, transcriptions — that is, for an audience of myself.”

Perhaps we should do the same.

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Let us pray:

Living, loving God, help us to remember the importance of slow time, of silence, of rest and rejuvenation. It is so important to take time out for recovery and renewal that Jesus even advises his disciples to do so. Please help us to remember that slow time is not wasted time. That we need to recharge, just like everyone else. Rest is important. Remind us to rest a while. Amen.