

With or without us

Have the disciples started to think this is all about them? I know I would.

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I write this from a retreat center in Washington State. I'm on vacation, supposedly. In reality I am still writing, worrying about my church community and even instant messaging parishioners to ask how church went. It's almost impossible for me to disengage.

Pastors are notorious for overworking, and the church colludes with its clergy in this particular sin. When people say, "Pastor Bob is a total workaholic," we all know that this is secretly seen as a pastoral virtue. To work 60+ hours a week is to show commitment and passion.

And there's so much work to do, isn't there? How is the church supposed to function without us? Well-meaning friends smile and say that we must take a sabbath and rest. But as a friend of mine once observed, rest is only part of the reason for taking a sabbath. If the sabbath were *only* for rest, we might be tempted to think it serves only to fuel us back up so we can do more work. After all, our work is *very* important. The world needs us.

"You *have* to take sabbath," my friend told me, "if only to realize that God's redeeming work in the world actually goes on just fine without you." Ouch.

The other extreme is the cult of self-care. I'm not talking about proper sleep, nutrition, exercise and family time. I'm talking about forsaking commitments to community in order to "take care of myself"; spending endless money on vacations and pampering and self-indulgence; retreating from challenging relationships—all of which is simply narcissism in the guise of virtuous self-care. In reality, neither the narcissism of workaholism nor that of self-absorption is a virtue.

In this week's Gospel reading, I wonder if the apostles have started to think that Jesus' ministry is about them. They've just come off their first healing and casting-out-demons campaign. Surely it's tempting to let the whole thing go to their heads. It would go to mine.

But Jesus has them leave their adoring public and eat together. Meanwhile, he continues to teach and to heal—just as he continues to teach and to heal the whole world today, with or without our help.

If the disciples have begun to develop an exaggerated sense of self-importance, they must be dismayed to see how much ministry goes on without them. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God that it proclaims have broken out all around them. Notice that the people beg Jesus to let them touch his cloak. This particularity bears the signature of someone we met in chapter 5—surely [our bleeding sister](#) has preached Christ to her village. This formerly unclean outsider has told others what God has done for her. It's this proclamation, not that of the disciples, that causes the people to bring their sick to Jesus.

Like the disciples, we are faced with the reality that our narcissism is not a virtue. We remember our right size when we see that God's redeeming work in the world might involve us but doesn't depend on us. Christ teaches and heals and makes himself known in our communities and churches even without us. Even—perhaps especially—when the pastor is on vacation. Thanks be to God.