

“Gathering around Jesus”

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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July 21, 2024

From the Pulpit

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Let us pray: O Ever-present and Ever-near God, come to us now, and touch our hearts and move our spirits through Your Word for us this day. And oh, dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.

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I'd like to begin this morning by posing some questions for all of you to consider: How many of YOU create daily, or perhaps, weekly checklists or written reminders or to-do lists regarding all those:

- household or job-related tasks that you *must* complete;
- or those phone calls that you *must* make;
- or those work – or church -- meetings that you *must* attend;
- or those *other* appointments and commitments that you must keep?

I realize that *all* of us – no matter our various and respective roles – no matter the stage or season of our lives – *all* of us have **A LOT** to keep track of in our day-to-day routines.

And, I am also aware that, these days, there are numerous ways to be reminded of our daily schedules and commitments, and just as important, there are also different ways to be reminded to take a break ... and rest!!

Perhaps you are someone who sets reminders on your phone or use a web-based app like Calendly or Google Calendar – or maybe you write your appointments on the wall calendar in your kitchen – or create a checklist in

your daily planner – or maybe you are a “sticky note” user or a “Post-it note queen” like me!

Or, it may be that you use a number of these different approaches to organize your days and honor your commitments.

At home, I am known to even stick Post-it notes ON our large family desk blotter calendar that we keep on the kitchen counter ... plus, I also add all my meetings and appointments to my UCC Desk Calendar and Plan Book as well!

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No matter *how* we prioritize and keep track of our commitments, it is important, of course, that we do so!

In fact, I have come to see this organizing task as yet another **spiritual practice** – or an intentional routine that not only gives shape and meaning to our days – and our weeks – and our lives – *but* such a practice also helps us to establish and maintain healthy boundaries by being realistic and clear in identifying our priorities ... *while also being* discerning about what it is that we must put “on hold” for the time-being – and/ or what activities or commitments we need **to finally set down for good.**

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Our Gospel story from Mark, this morning, may be familiar to you; it is a lectionary reading that we return to, in worship, every three years.

And one of the themes of this reading that often emerges for preachers and worshipers alike is the need that all of us have – at times; that is, that need to retreat, and rest, and reset and recharge in our personal lives – as well as in the ministry that we are called to do – together – as followers of Jesus Christ.

However, our text for this morning **ALSO** reminds us that it is not always that easy – or simple – or practical – to find the time to create the sacred

space in our lives that each one of us needs for **holy rest and reflection and prayer!**

Now, at the beginning of this pericope, we catch a glimpse of the disciples *gathering around Jesus* and sharing with him the stories about what *I imagine* were the joys and concerns of their shared ministry among the crowds as well as their personal experiences of offering healing and hope to the people.

We also see in our text for today the disciples *gathering around Jesus* – regularly – in order to discuss with him the challenges and the obstacles and the anxiety that they surely experienced – at times – in the ministry that Jesus called them to do *wherever* Jesus led them.

However, in *this* particular scene, it wasn't even possible for Jesus and his disciples to have an *uninterrupted* conversation because the needs of the people were so overwhelming – and the crowds surrounded them – and we see *the people gathering around Jesus* – desperate to receive Jesus' healing touch.

And then, Jesus, being the compassionate and responsive and adaptive leader that he was, insisted that the disciples and he set out **right away** in order to find the time and space to rest; *not* to evangelize, *not* to teach, *not* to preach, *not* to heal, *not* to serve ... but to retreat and to rest – together.

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The Biblical Greek word for “rest” in this story is: “anapausis” (ἀνάπαυσις pronounced uh-NOP-i-SEES) which literally means to pause and to rest.

And so, in this profound and pivotal moment early on in their shared ministry, Jesus doesn't *suggest* to the disciples that they all go off and find a quiet place to take a 20 minute “power nap.” Rather, Jesus **commands** the disciples to practice *anapausis*. He commands them **to pause** *so that they would find rest*.

And so, they **attempted** to do so ... Jesus and the disciples headed off to what was **supposed to be** a quiet place:

- a place to rest their bodies;
- a place to refresh their spirits;
- *and* a place to restore their strength.

Now, Jesus and his disciples traveled by boat to what was believed to have been a deserted place at that time. However, it turns out that they didn't have any time, whatsoever, to be alone and to rest because the crowds of people caught up with them, there, as well.

And what were the people doing? They were *gathering around Jesus* because they were *desperate* for inspiration and guidance and direction and healing in their lives.

And how did **Jesus** respond to the people? Jesus met the people *exactly* where there were and in **all of** their need. And so, it was there, in that remote place, that Jesus began to teach and inspire and encourage the crowds among them.

And then, again, later on, in this same pericope, we encounter a similar situation, but this time ... Jesus and his disciples had made it to Genessarat, the small plain bordering the west shore of the Sea of Galilee, between Capernaum and Magdala.

But, again, the crowds of people rushed to seek Jesus out in that region, bringing to him all who were ill and in need of healing.

This time, it was the people of Genessarat who **were ALSO** *gatherering around Jesus* – that they, too, would receive hope and healing and new life.

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Now, I don't know about you, but I find our text from Mark for today to be a bit challenging to follow because there are these multiple scenes and settings

in this story – and many *different* crowds and countless individuals who presented to Jesus – with various needs for healing and wholeness.

Through **this** writing in this sixth chapter, the Gospel writer of Mark certainly depicts a time of high anxiety and stress and despair and even chaos – as well as the deep need among the people – for healing and wholeness and grace.

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A time of high anxiety and stress and despair and chaos.

Hmm ... does that sound familiar to any of you? Can you relate as we all seek to make sense of the current state of affairs across our nation – just this past week – including an attempted assassination of the former President, resulting in the tragic loss of life of two other individuals?

And ALL of that – of course – is on top of an especially acrimonious political climate – across our country including the sharp divisions and bitter rhetoric, so far, in this cycle of the presidential campaigns and the national party conventions. Oh, my goodness!

As we move forward, as a nation, and deeper into the partisan politics that come with this consequential presidential election year:

- may we all find inspiration and direction as we *gather around Jesus* together;
- may we all find grounding through our shared faith and values as well as our commitments and priorities;
- and may all we find meaning and purpose and hope through our shared ministries and our witness as the church in the world today.

I'd like to close this morning with a brief prayer that was written in response to the events of this past week by the Rev. Dr. Diana Butler Bass, a progressive theologian and an award-winning author:

**O God who is beyond politics and nations,
Christ who transcends the power of violence,
Holy Spirit who animates all people,
be with us in this moment of violence, division, and turmoil.**

**Transform our rage and pain –
that we might see our brothers and sisters with your eyes.
Break our hearts of stone,
and give us hearts of love and understanding –
that your peace might prevail.**

Amen.