

Where Nobody Knows Your Name
Mark 1.29-39
Epiphany +5
Sunday, February 8, 2015
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

In my senior year at Samford University, I took a January-term course with Dr. Dennis Sansom. We read the great writers of Christian Spirituality from the desert fathers and mothers to contemporary reflections on the interior life. The course culminated with a 24-hour retreat at a beautiful center just outside of Birmingham. We each had a private bedroom, lush grounds to walk and observe, and an expansive residence with many cozy reading spots. Ah, but there was one little twist: the 24-hours were to be spent fasting and in silence.

At the time I was a top-of-the-Myers-Briggs extrovert who had enjoyed, to paraphrase my friend Deanne Aime, the “expansive celebratory lifestyle” that was a bustling college campus. However nervous, I felt certain I could give myself to this experience for a mere 24-hours.

A couple of years ago, Intervarsity created a humorous pair of pie charts showing how Introverts and Extroverts, particularly of the undergraduate variety, experience silent retreats. The Introvert chart shows 2/3 of the time spent journaling and almost 1/3 of the time spent re-reading old journal entries and planning new journal entries.

The Extrovert chart shows 2/3 of the time spent sleeping and almost 1/3 of the time spent walking around looking for the perfect spot and then Instagramming the perfect spot to share on social media. While the Introvert chart pokes fun of those who accidentally make eye contact with others, the Extrovert chart gives equal time to purposefully making eye contact with others on retreat.

So after I had found my perfect spot and read for a bit, written for a bit, thought about what I might say about how spiritual my first two hours had been, I went back to my room to take a nap. The only time we met with others was when our professor would read from the Psalter at designated hours. It was after the vesper reading that I began seeking out eye contact. Maria Burgess was first. Nowadays she leads spiritual development classes but that night years ago it was obvious she had maxed out her silent time, reading time, reflecting time, and nap time. We silently crept up a flight of stairs and discovered an attic room with couches and a radio. And we TALKED. Then we decided Jake Hall, now senior pastor at Highland Hills in Macon, Georgia, would be a willing accomplice, so we crept back downstairs to find his room.

Like the good Extrovert he was, Jake was sound asleep. But as soon as he saw us, he knew he was free. We went back to the upstairs hangout and talked for a while before we took it one step further. In true Baptist-rebellion-style, we silently pushed Jake’s jeep out of the parking lot in

neutral as we snuck out of the retreat center, went to IHOP for late-night pancakes, and then watched *Dirty Dancing* at Maria's apartment before sneaking back in for the night.

Many years later, my life is quite different. Add children and life experience, and the promise of 24-hours away, somewhere beautiful, in absolute silence sounds like a fantasy. My challenge as a pastor, a wife, and a mother is to set aside a little time each day and most of one day each week to be alone, sit in silence, read and pray, write and reflect. There are some weeks I am unsuccessful at saving even 30 minutes, but lately I am keenly aware of the need to schedule and guard that time alone if I am to be of any good to my family, to my church, to my world, to myself, and to my God, in the other hours of the week.

Our gospel text this morning brings us back to Mark where we left off last week. Jesus emerges from the wilderness to begin his ministry, and he starts with a conflict in the temple. People aren't quite sure what to make of his incredible teaching and his apparent authority with even the dark, unseen spirits. But by today's scene, the whole town is lining up to see him, hear him, touch him, be seen by him, watch how he heals, be blessed by him.

After a long day of healing, gathering, freeing, talking, casting out, he rests. And while the others are, presumably, still sleeping, he sneaks away from them all and goes to find a place alone to pray.

Even Jesus cannot give, heal, listen, bless over and over without going away, hiding, praying, finding rest. He knows he must claim it for himself. He must wake up early, sneak out to where he is hidden. He will return. He will give and heal and bless again, but in this moment he knows he must be quiet to be filled up.

So why do we resist this same behavior?

In between the whole city coming to him and his companions HUNTING for him, Jesus finds a quiet place to be alone, to pray, to claim the silence of a hidden place.

Jesus does not allow himself to be everything people want. He knows he needs to rise early to make this happen. It is too important to move into the next day and the next town unprepared, unrested. He is fully human, after all. And he understands that rest and reflection are intimately connected to living and working. The process of withdrawing to pray is one of giving ourselves to God as Source. It is in intentionally withdrawing that we are filled up again, equipped once more for the work of our days. It is in finding a quiet place where all of the clutter and chatter disappear that we can hear God's voice or sense God's pull. We need Sabbath rest.

In their book *Sabbath in the City*, Bryan Stone and Claire Wolfeich write about a pastor leaving a hectic, urban pastorate for sabbatical in Arizona desert to get away “from the patterns that kept her from herself and from God’s presence.”¹

We are tempted to make certain work gets what work needs from us, spouse or partner gets what he or she needs from us, children get what they need from us, community gets what community needs from us, and maybe there’s a little left over for self at the end. Busy can keep us from ourselves and from God’s presence.

In Rob Bell’s new weekly podcast, he recently asked the question, “Why has ‘crazy busy’ become normal? Why is that an acceptable response” when we are asked how we have been lately? “I’ve been crazy busy,” we say without hesitation. We live in a culture that celebrates over-committing, falling short, to-do lists longer than our work weeks. The result, Bell says, is that we are not awake to our lives. We are too busy and too distracted to see the life God is inviting us to live.²

Many weeks ago, during Advent, we talked about Mary saying “yes” to God when she became the mother of Jesus. She became a co-creator and partner in the unfolding of God’s story, and she carried her “yes” to her cousin Elizabeth who had also said “yes” to God. Together they rested, prayed, and delighted in God’s presence in their lives and in the world.

Jesus is now showing us that saying “no” becomes easier when we remain connected to that “yes” we have said to God.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus emerges from the wilderness with a clear sense of the call on his life and the word he must spread throughout Galilee. He will challenge people, anger people, and upset the status quo. He will be surrounded at all times by people who want to learn from him and be near him because they realize that drawing near to him draws them near to God, and they want as much as they can get of both.

So Jesus slips away to pray because he knows he has to save that time, and before long people are hunting after him, begging him to stay. In Luke’s telling of this same story, the people who find him actively try to prevent him from leaving. But Jesus knows he is called to something larger than just the needs of one town. He says no easily and clearly because he knows what his “yes” is. He remains clear in his focus because he returns to the “yes” again and again when he withdraws from all of the known places.

Whoever God has uniquely shaped us to be in the world becomes our filter for other things we choose. We are sometimes involved in so many good things that they take away from the few best things. There are endless demands on our time and energy, and so many of the demands are really good things. But sometimes, says Bell, “the good is often the enemy of the best.”

¹ Stone and Wolfeich, *Sabbath in the City*; p. 38

² *The RobCast* by Rob Bell; Episode 1: One Thing—various themes and notes inspired by this 30 minute podcast

Jesus walks away from people literally begging him to stay. He wakes up early and finds the hidden place to be alone. He does all of this without guilt or a nagging sense of “shoulds.” I really *should* stay another day. I really *should* heal a few more people. I really *should* sit with them for just one more meal. No. Jesus walks away. He disappoints. He leaves work unfinished. He knows what he needs to be at his best, and he knows that the next thing God is calling him to do requires him to be fully present, fully engaged, fully rested.

Is this making your heart race a bit faster? The thought of not “doing” anything for a day? Or an afternoon? Or even an hour every day? We live so long with noise and clutter and obligation that we forget it doesn’t need to be there.

We carry the emotional clutter of criticism, guilt, and fear. There’s the physical clutter of garage and closets and storage units. And the achingly familiar clutter of calendar with board meetings, committee tasks, and work, home, church, civic, and krewe obligations.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Remember that Mark moves quickly and does not waste words. So when Jesus gets these four verses of a scene away from town, hiding in this quiet place, Mark is telling us to pay attention.

And he’ll show us again: In chapter 6 Jesus will feed a great crowd with a meal that begins with five loaves and two fish. Then *immediately* he sends his disciples off in a boat, dismisses the crowd of 5000 men, and he goes up on a mountain to pray. I can just see him standing and waving, *Goodbye! Farewell! It’s been a great day!* Then he scurries up that mountain to be quiet.

Toward the end of his life, in chapter 14, he invites his disciples to join him in the practice, but they haven’t given themselves to it like he has. He prays in Gethsemane, but they fall asleep. He wants them to be awake. He wants them to pray with him and value that time in a hidden place. He wants them to understand that the strength they need for the next day’s calling starts with the stillness of that dark garden.

Jesus gives us permission to say “no” to the clutter and busy-ness because we have said “yes” to him.

When we are setting this time aside, it is important for us to make the distinction between “just a day off” and Sabbath. The distinction is important because naming our practices of rest and prayer help us understand Sabbath as “a great gift offering badly needed rest and balance, opening up a different way of being, helping to restore right relationships with self, family, and

community.”³ What happens there, in that quiet, hidden place each morning or the whole day set aside, will become the lens through which we see the rest of our hours and days.

Let’s cultivate this practice here. Look at your calendar as a prayer practice. What can you let go? What tasks are keeping you from yourself and from God? Look at your closets and garages as a spiritual act. What is taking up space in your life that prevents you from living as you were uniquely shaped and created. Listen to your life and the *shoulds* and guilt and words of obligation. Release them and say “yes” to the practices that draw you back to God’s presence.

Frederick Buechner describes the process as unfolding slowly: “The room is quiet. You’re not feeling tired enough to sleep or energetic enough to go out. For the moment there is nowhere else you’d rather go, no one else you’d rather be. You feel at home in your body. You feel at peace in your mind. For no particular reason, you let the palms of your hands come together and close your eyes. Sometimes it is only when you happen to taste a crumb of it that you dimly realize what it is that you’re so hungry for you can hardly bear it.”⁴

At first you may not know what to do with yourself in slowness and silence. Maybe the way of prayer is foreign and seems unnatural. Begin to observe the world around you, as Mary Oliver notes in her poem “The Summer Day”:

from “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?⁵

While it is still dark, go to a hidden place. Be still, pay attention, listen, pray, study, write, take note, observe. It is in this Sabbath rest that we are being shaped for life.

³ Stone and Wolfeich, p. 39

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: Sabbath*; pp. 100-101

⁵ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, 1992; Beacon Press, Boston, MA