

It is our custom to include in each Sunday’s bulletin what might be dubbed a preview of coming attractions, though it is simply my attempt to predict what might be the theme of the next week’s sermon. In last week’s bulletin, I suggested we might learn from today’s Gospel reading “when and how we can say ‘no’ in the midst of so many calls for our time and energy.” When I sent this preview to Peggy, she asked if I really wanted to suggest teaching people to say “no,” just when the nominating committee is preparing to ask people to say “yes” to serve on a church board or the pastor nominating committee. Good point, but I decided not to edit the description, because this lesson may also help us understand the priority for our choices.

Our reading in Mark 6 is in two parts. The first has Jesus greeting his disciples upon their return from a mission of healing and teaching, similar to what we will be doing with our Philippines mission team members this Tuesday. Jesus’ goal is to give them a retreat, where they can rest, and in our parlance, debrief. He sensed they needed some time away because as the Gospel lesson records, “many [people] were coming and going and they did not even have leisure to eat.” That phrase is often noticed by those living busy lives and sensing great demands on their time and energy.

In the second section of our lesson, there will be a reference to a place named Gennesaret. What first century readers would know, but we may not, is this town, at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, is in a region known for its mineral hot springs. [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Bartlett and Taylor, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 265)] And for what reason do people, even today, visit hot springs? Healing. So, when we hear of Jesus stepping off the boat and people immediately flocking to touch him, we see him as an alternative source of healing.

Peter and I will share our Gospel reading. Peter will speak the part of Jesus, just to assure you a pastor doesn’t always have to play the savior – and, in fact, probably never should. Let us listen to our Gospel lesson in Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, with the context again being Jesus’ disciples returning from their mission.

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. Jesus said to them,*

***‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’***

*For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw Jesus and the disciples going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.*

***As I went ashore, I saw a great crowd; and I had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and I began to teach them many things.***

*[After another day of activity, Jesus and the disciples again boarded the boat and crossed the lake.] When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.*

***When we got out of the boat, people at once recognized me, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard I was. And wherever I went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged me that they might touch even the fringe of my cloak;***

*And all who touched it were healed.*

I thought the gas prices were too high as we drove through Santa Fe, New Mexico, beginning our trip back to Ohio, after a four week western swing. This was 1980, so when I say too the gas prices were too high, I am talking about a few cents over a dollar a gallon. I was likely wanting to pay just 99 cents, and being sure prices would be lower at the edge of the city, I drove on. The problem was there were no gas stations at the edge of the city, but we still had enough fuel to make the next town. The problem was there really was not a next town.

My anxiety set in as we continued to drive along, knowing we were now too far along to turn back. Long story short, a gas station finally appeared on the horizon, and though I cannot verify this is what happened, the story is better if I tell you we ran out of gas just before reaching the station, but had enough momentum to coast in with the car stopping right at the very welcome gas pump. Today, I would call that a grace moment, and given the circumstances, I did not mind paying well over a dollar per gallon!

One footnote. For those who are wondering why I did not check my smart phone for the price and location of gas stations, let me remind you this was thirty-five years ago, when we relied on road atlases and trip-tiks, and I used a typewriter for my sermons. For those not familiar with road atlases, trip-tiks, or typewriters, perhaps some of us can offer a history lesson during the fellowship time.

I think it is common for us to live life with a gas up, go, and drive until you are empty rhythm. Food and sleep are the common measures of what it takes to sustain our energy to take on each day and week. Yes, most of us can recognize if we are running on fumes, and need to stop, but we also may see no way to stop, either because of life's demands, our own stubbornness or a legitimate sense of responsibility. Along the road, we can become anxious when that next time or place of rest is beyond our horizon of our sight and knowledge. But, we keep going, trusting we will have enough fuel to coast into a needed time or place of rest, because, after all, we've done it before.

I sense a kinship with the disciples this morning, as Jesus recognizes their weariness, their need for rest, as they return from their missionary travels. We recall they were sent out in pairs and without money or provisions, meaning they had the added anxiety of being dependent on the goodwill and hospitality of others. And there were no doubt times they were rejected for their message.

Jesus tells the disciples, *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while*. The phrase “deserted place,” sometimes translated “lonely place,” or “quiet place,” has the implication of a wilderness spot, a place apart from the comings and goings of life, perhaps away from even having wifi or cell phone connections. Today we call these times retreats, and they are not only for spiritual nourishment for the church for we see corporations and groups also retreating, taking “time away” from the normal comings and goings to rest or strategize.

Wilderness – a place to be alone with self or a few others; a place away from the busy; a place to retune one’s life to inner things. Wildernesses mark places of resting, where we claim a stillness to enable us to focus, center, clarify. Wilderness can also be a place of revelation, where we discover truths about ourselves our busyness has masked, and even ways we may use our busyness to keep those truths from being uncovered.

I like how professor Karen Yust writes of our modern day “comings and goings” busyness as she reflects on our lesson:

“Is not this [coming and going and not having leisure to eat] not a succinct description of the live of many people today? Too busy to pause for a real lunch, young professionals munch on vending machine fare while working at their desks. Teens grab a bagel for breakfast on the way out the door to school. Parents and children drive through a succession of fast-food restaurants between after-school lessons and sports practices. Commuters sip double lattes on the early morning drive, gnaw on baby carrots between meetings, and pick up takeout on the way home. Toddlers graze on cereal pieces and other portable finger foods so meal schedules need not control the timing of family shopping trips.” [Ibid., p. 260]

Yet, how helpful is it to be reminded of our busy comings and goings lifestyles without suggesting an alternative? On the surface, our Gospel reading does not seem to help either. Yes, Jesus knows what the disciples need, and puts them in a boat to find a deserted place for them to land and rest. Yet, when they step off the boat, all the plans and intentions are put on hold.

The verse that turns the tables and still jumps out at me, whether I read this story in Mark’s or Matthew’s gospel, is when Jesus goes ashore and sees the crowd. He sees the crowd, and ... he had compassion on them. He had compassion on them, and that compassion called off the retreat plans. Jesus reenters the busyness of demand to attend to those he saw as sheep without a shepherd. My goodness, couldn’t the crowd wait? Couldn’t Jesus tell them to take a number and he would be back in a couple days. Why couldn’t he keep his plans to refuel the disciples after their exhausting missions? Isn’t Jesus risking something by trying to coast on fumes a bit longer? Yet, something in compassion makes a difference.

What the lesson suggests is compassion is not a distraction, but a measure of priority. Compassion is a measure of priority, because compassion is the nature of God. Few would question God’s compassionate nature, though it is not usually among the first words people list if asked to describe God. The first are usually God is loving, powerful, all knowing. A few might mention Israel’s early recorded history where the divine nature is portrayed as violent and vengeful, but most will use just and peace-loving as descriptions of God’s nature. So, from where did this priority for compassion arise?

Around 900BC, Israel had been established as a nation, and a line of kings beginning with Saul and David had led it for a hundred years. At that time, about 3,000 years ago, it is suggested a shift in understanding God's nature took place. [Ibid., p. 264] Prior to being established as a nation, Israel understood God to be one who would use violence to drown a pursuing Egyptian army, as well as empower Israel's army to overcome all enemies. Yet, once the nation was established, God began to notice within the established nation how the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger were being neglected or mistreated. A shift was made from God's power to God's compassion, which in English has the meaning, "with suffering." God's nature of compassion was echoed by Israel's prophets, who eschewed ritual animal sacrifice in favor of feeding the hungry, and called out neglect of the poor.

Compassion is the nature of God made known to us in the life and teachings of Jesus, the nature of God that alighted from that boat on the Sea of Galilee, the nature of God that saw the crowd, and the nature of God that canceled the disciples' retreat because of the need seen. It is the compassionate nature of God to be a shepherd to sheep, who become lost and vulnerable if left on their own. And it is this very compassionate nature that is our inheritance, Christ's expectation for both his disciples then and the church today. The lesson suggests the church see itself as the fringe of fringe of Christ's cloak, for which people are still seeking to reach out and touch to be made whole. [Ibid.]

Yet still, then as today, in many of our own lives, and in the church as well, there are many people and things seeking our time and commitment. We know about comings and goings and times when there is no leisure even to eat. We are tired, we are few, our time is limited and our plates are full.

I find our Gospel story offers two lessons for busy lives and full plates we consume on the run. First, we are challenged to measure what we have placed on our plates in terms of God's nature of compassion. In so doing, we will determine what is sustaining us and what is draining us. What may surprise us is finding that which sustains us is rooted in compassion, and what is draining us is linked to obligation. We cannot eliminate all obligation, but we can recognize when it is the reason we have no leisure even to eat.

The second lesson I find in our story is for us to reconsider living with a gas up, go, and drive until empty lifestyle. Even in the church, we speak of being spiritually filled – often by prayer and worship – before we go out and burn that spiritual fuel to do mission, to show compassion. When our group of twenty return Tuesday night from their ten day mission trip to the Philippines, I anticipate they are going to be exhausted, and may well need a quiet place. Yet, we also know their work of compassion has also fed them richly. I encourage us not to think of mission in the church, or even commitments to family or community to be just the burning of fuel, but a source of energy when rooted in the nature of compassion.

When our three children were young, and growing, we decided we needed a van and purchased one the year before minivans came on the market. Over the years, that Ford Club Wagon served us well, but as it aged, its gas gauge became a bit quirky. We would fill up the tank, but very soon the needle on the gas gauge would plummet to empty. Of course, we knew it was not close to empty. Then, it would swing back up to almost full ... and stay there ... and stay there ... until we ran out of gas. Given it was an older vehicle at the time, we lived with it, but we learned to fill up more often to be sure we would not run out.

Perhaps that is the pace of life we might consider. Avoid thinking we can fill up, and go at full speed until we are running on fumes before stopping. Instead, stop more often, take more leisure to eat, find more moments to rest.

In so doing, as my sermon preview suggested, we will learn how to say “no” to the many calls for our time and energy. What I failed to include in that preview is that as inheritors of Jesus’ nature of compassion, we will also learn there are times to say “yes,” even when running on fumes.