

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
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Sermon Notes
Be a Pray-er
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Imagery is not always kind to the soul. Think about it, what could ever accurately reflect a soul, anyway?

Keeping up appearances, perceptions, to “show people” who you are, we are -- too often becomes a source of deception, instead. In the process, what is and is not real gets confused, lost, and blended in ways that can create the strangest of actions.

Aside from positive or negative campaigning, consider the way our nation receives the example of mental, spiritual, and physical help modeled by the presidential candidates.

As we approach the elections, the images of these folk will be even more carefully crafted than they have been, making it difficult to get to know people if all we watch or listen to are sound bites and commercials. And even if we do the work to research these folks more carefully – it’s hard to tell fact from fiction. My comments today that flow from our gospel reading about Mark and are centered about rest and prayer, and how both are presented as a model or witness, if you like. Back to campaigning...

While prayer in this campaign seems to be more of a tag line “God Bless You! God Bless America! (forget the rest of the world) – a tag line that is generally accepted and being either a good thing or without any value as if everybody just sneezed! – the image of rest produces an extreme response in the opposite direction. And play? Even worse.

You may remember the kerfuffle that Candidate Romney experienced over being seen jet-skiing with his wife; not a bad thing by any means – but considered a bad thing for a presidential candidate when the great majority of the country is under economic duress. It’s bad imagery.

Or remember the beer in the Rose Garden; the golf games; and such of the President.

These days, even the president, mindful of the images and their potential impact, canceled his annual vacation to Martha’s Vineyard, instead delivering a speech that forced him to address the dismal news of less than 80,000 new jobs being created in June.

What's real what's not. Please one side anger the other. Where are we supposed to go in our thinking, let alone our voting?

But really...When did family time or rest, within the budget you can afford, become a bad thing? When did it become something that came to mean being out of touch; a zealot; or just plain lazy?

It most likely has something to do with Americans wanting a "working president," with few Americans really having any idea of what being the president entails – and a sense of resentment by the many who have to work day in and day out – watching others who "seem to have it all;" as somehow better than they; seeming to have no idea of the extreme hardships of others - outside of sound-bites. I guess we don't want a president who looks like he or she is having fun – especially if we are having little fun. In fact, I think that is where the place of "anger" in these campaigns has found some of its footing. "How can they be enjoying themselves when we are so miserable?"

Or is it jealousy and greed, using the outsides of people and forgetting their insides. In the process we become superficial and caught up in the anger and the polarization and the nihilism, the sense that, well, everything is soon going to be shot to hell. And we all get angry!

Whatever it may be, it is unfair to expect presidents, presidential candidates, or any one of us to be a "working machine, living on the surface only, discounting time by looking for everything now – willing to trade down the future results of consistent, steady effort.

And the struggles and tragedies are real and daunting. The shooting in the theater in Colorado is real and, yes, somehow incrementally fostered by our society's anger and divisions. Or so I think. And, we do have struggles and many of us do work more than one job to make ends meet, including the work to find a job or just get through a day.

Even so. Does that mean we don't pray or rest? Is there any situation or condition that means we don't rest? Meditate? Pray? I remember thinking as a kid that I had to be perfect in order to pray. Work hard to get to someplace where I could be "good." As for rest, well it always seemed I had to do more or better, in work around home or studies in school.

With this in mind, the question for me today, from the fringes of Mark's gospel, is "Am I a pray-er"? Am I someone who rests, stops, prays, meditates – suspends, with practice – the noise around me. Drops below the surface, enters into the space that produces no products or calculable outcomes...but feeds me and guides me in who I really am in relation to God. "Oh, I can't stop! There's too much to do!"

“I don’t have time to pray right now, maybe later.”

“I will be late...this is silly...I have too much on my mind...I am too worried.”

“I am too anxious to pray right now...”

Yet Paul in Philippians 4:6 says: “Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, tell your requests to God in your every prayer and petition—with thanksgiving.”

Pause. Rest. Pray. Listen. Be guided. Be thankful.

In today’s reading of Mark, the passage is a familiar one about the feeding of the 5,000. It is, in fact, where our offertory response comes from. That passage is so familiar, that it overshadows the parts before and after –

Just before,

- the disciples return from going out into the villages and communities spreading the Good News, returning they tell Jesus “all they had done and taught.” They had been working, cold-calling if you will – entering into places not always friendly, not always ready to listen and they had achieved some wondrous things. And Jesus’ first response according to Mark wasn’t “Great job!” It was compassion for these faithful disciples, whom he loved and who were exuberant and exhausted and Jesus says,
- “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves (away from the crowds) and rest a while.”

Take a break. You deserve it. You need it. There is more to do, but first, eat, rest, pray.

And still the crowds pursued them, so much so that by the time Jesus and the disciples got to the other side of the lake, the crowds had rushed there to be with them, in their presence. And Jesus had compassion on the lost souls and taught them, fed them, and in the end collected more food than they had started with, for the generosity of those present began to flow...and there was abundance for all.

And when they had finished, Jesus “immediately” made his disciples get into the boat and go on to the other side to Bethsaida to rest, while he remained with the crowds so that they could get away for a while.

There is an expression in 12 step meetings that hinges on the word “HALT.” It means that if you are starting to feel anxious, nervous, troubled, or tempted to do something you don’t want to do...stop. HALT! Get away from the situation for a minute or two and think about whether you are:

Hungry

Angry
Lonely or
Tired

Because one or more of those conditions can “change your thinking and behavior” just as they can impair your health, well-being, or interaction with others.

It seems Jesus knew this and part of his teachings, in fact much of his teachings intersect and interconnect with each of these time and again.

Eat. Rest. Pray. Listen. Be guided. Be with others in rest. Prayer. Compassion. These things, too, are teachings of Jesus.
Above all, Jesus emphasized the personal aspect of prayer with God, so intimately that he referred to God as Abba.

And he taught this to us.

When you pray, don't pray in fancy, public ways for everyone to see. Pray behind closed doors to God: “do not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray while standing in synagogues and on street corners so that people can see them. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your God in secret. And God, who sees all in secret, will reward you.” Matthew 6: 1-4

In other words however you pray, however your prayer develops changes and grows, or even forms into moments and times of silence...it's just fine.
In other words, public worship such as this brings us together and is important, just as the disciples came and rested and prayed together, but so too important is the quiet place between you and God, where we can be heard and listen and be guided. Refreshed, reconnected, and feel God's love.

No showcases here. No carefully crafted images to spin opinion or perception. Just real, deep, uncertain - Rest and Prayer. Prayer and Rest.

There will be plenty to do when done resting and praying, and the plenty will be better done once we are rested and filled with prayer.

Simply put: Be a pray-er and life will become ever nearer to being a prayer.
Amen.