

2-4-18 Sermon: “Practicing Holy No’s” – Mark 1:29-39

Last week, when we left off with Jesus, he had just finished preaching and casting out demons in the synagogue. Today’s reading picks up just moments later. “As soon as they left the synagogue,” Mark tells us, “they entered the house of Simon and Andrew.” There they meet Simon’s mother-in-law, who is in bed with a fever, and Jesus heals her on the spot. That same evening, people from all over Capernaum come to the house. They bring everyone they know who is sick and possessed by demons. And, working until the wee hours of the morning, Jesus heals them all.

Talk about a full day! Jesus starts teaching and healing early in the morning and doesn’t stop until after anyone in their right mind would have gone to sleep. The story charges along at breakneck speed, punctuated by the persistent drumbeat of Mark’s favorite word, “immediately.” *Immediately*, Jesus entered the synagogue. *Immediately* they left and went into the house. *Immediately* they told Jesus about Simon’s sick mother-in-law. One more thing to do, one more person to heal, on and on it goes. It’s no wonder that the next morning, while his disciples are still asleep, Jesus sneaks off to a quiet, deserted place to pray. At the rate things are going, this might be the only break he’s going to get!

We know that feeling, don’t we? That feeling of constant busyness. Of one activity running into the next, and into the next. Of the constant barrage of demands on our time and our energy. There’s work to do, kids to drop off, meetings to attend, clothes to wash, boards to chair, pipes to fix, homework to finish, kids to pick up, projects to finish, checkbooks to balance, briefs to file, meals to cook, phones to answer, emails to return. There’s no end to individuals and organizations seeking our time, talents, and treasure, no shortage of ways we can help out in our community. There are friends and family waiting for us to stop by, or write, or call. And we try to do it all, because we know it all matters, but we can never quite make it – we’re always sacrificing one thing for another, always disappointing someone.

We know how it feels to come to the end of a day utterly exhausted. And in spite of all that we might have accomplished that day to feel emptied out, unsatisfied. We understand, don’t we, that desire to sneak off, just for a minute. To take a moment to ourselves and just *breathe*.

Jesus steals away to a deserted place to pray. And of course, as soon as his disciples notice he’s gone, they go looking for him. When they find him, they begin to almost scold him: “*Everyone* is looking for you!” they say. “You have to go back to the crowds, there’s more people you need to heal.” But Jesus tells them that it’s time for something different: He has come to preach the gospel, and now he needs to carry the message to other towns.

Something within Jesus has changed during his time of prayer. Prayer can do that, if we’re open to it. It grounds us in the presence of God, reminds us who we are and more importantly, *whose* we are. Prayer makes space for feelings that emerge from deep within us, feelings we may have pushed away in our relentless flurry of activity, or shoved down under so many layers of busyness. Prayer makes space in our minds and our hearts to listen for the voice of God.

After a day of ministry at breakneck speed, our fully human, exhausted Savior goes off to pray to the God who sustains him. He stops to nurture his body, mind, and spirit. Jesus prays, and he hears a word from God. So that when his disciples find him and tell him it’s time to go back to the crowds, Jesus says no.

No. A word so short, so simple, so powerful, and often, so hard to say. “Hey Ginna, you’re coming to Santa Fe with us for that meeting, right?” “NAME, can I count on you to help

out at the event tomorrow?” “NAME, could you just try really hard to be there on Thursday?” “Jesus, can you come back into town and heal all those people who are waiting for you?”

“No.” He says. “No, I can’t. Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there. For that is what I came out to do.”

If I understand the text, I think Jesus is answering his disciples with a ‘holy no.’ Some of you may have heard me use that term before. What I mean by ‘holy no,’ are those times when someone asks me to take on a new role, or invites me to participate in an event, and I know deep within myself that I need to answer ‘no.’ Not because I don’t *want* to say yes – many of my ‘holy no’s’ have been to things that I’m good at, that I’m passionate about, that I enjoy doing. Rather, a ‘holy no’ is saying, “I know that what you are asking me to do is good, and important. But I don’t believe that it’s what God is calling me to do right now.”

Sometimes, we answer with a ‘holy no’ because we’ve got too much on our plate already. Other times, we turn down one request with a ‘holy no’ because we are feeling a pull to dedicate our time and energy to something else. And sometimes, our ‘holy no’s’ just come from a feeling deep in our gut that what is being asked of us is not what God is calling us to do.

Jesus answers the disciples request with a ‘holy no’, but he doesn’t do so to be contrary or cruel. He says ‘no’ to more healings in Capernaum *so that* he can say ‘yes’ to proclaiming the gospel in other towns. Because that’s the thing about a ‘holy no.’ We say ‘no’ to one thing so that we can say ‘yes’ to another. We say ‘no’ to one request so that we can say ‘yes’ to the place where God is calling us.

And if you ask me, I have a sneaking suspicion that Jesus knows where God is calling him to say ‘yes’ and where God is calling him to say ‘no’ because he has given himself the space to pray. Because he has taken the time to sit in the presence of God and just listen. Because he has gotten in touch with the ground of his being, reconnected to the source of his strength and calling. Because he has opened himself up to God, has said, “Tell me, Lord, what you want me to do; show me where you want me to go, because on my own, I just don’t know.”

And somewhere, in that conversation with God, Jesus gets the clarity he asks for. By the time the disciples find him, Jesus knows which way he is being called. And in order to say ‘yes’ to his call to preach the gospel far and wide, Jesus answers the request of his disciples with a ‘holy no.’

I will be the first to tell you that I struggle with saying a ‘holy no’. I’m fairly willing to bet that, in our first year together, you all have already figured that out. Even this week, as I’ve been praying over and wrestling with *this very text*, I must confess to you that I have struggled to, quite literally, “practice what I preach.” It’s not easy, this practice of saying “holy no’s”. But if we want to be the hands and feet of God in the world, if we’re in this discipleship thing for the long haul, practicing ‘holy no’s’ is *vital* important.

Maybe that’s why we call these things like prayer and discernment spiritual ‘practices.’ Because they *do* take practice. Just like playing the piano, or dunking a basketball, or making sopapillas. It’s particularly difficult because we who live in the media-saturated, information overload of the twenty-first century are not accustomed to silence, and stillness, and listening for the voice of God. We who exist in constant busyness, who have come to expect competing demands on our time, we who been brought up to say “Yes, of course I’ll do it!” don’t always know exactly *how* to say ‘no.’ It takes...practice. The practice of prayer. Of silence. Of listening for the voice of God.

I ask you to consider for a minute, friends: Where are those places in your lives where you are feeling drained, depleted, even held hostage by competing demands and constant

busyness? Where might God be inviting you to say a 'holy no'? Where might you, like Jesus, need to step back, and make room in your life to listen for the voice of God?

And, on the flip side, where might God be calling you to say a 'holy yes'? If you were able to clear away some of that clutter, what new thing might God have in store for you? What crazy idea has caught your attention lately and has nestled so deep in your mind that you just can't shake it? If you were to say a 'holy no' to something in your life that feels like a burden, where might you be able to turn and say a 'holy yes' to God?

I want to challenge you, this week and in the weeks to come, to keep an eye out for those places of 'holy yes' and 'holy no.' Make a little more space in your life for prayer, and silence – for listening to God. And I invite you simply to notice what happens. How does it feel? What do you hear? Where does the journey of prayer and discernment lead for you?

Because the truth is, friends, we, too, are called by God to proclaim the message gospel far and wide. To share the good news that God's Kingdom is breaking into this world, defeating all powers of evil, casting out those demons we met last week, the demons of hate, violence, racism, and supremacy. We, too, are the ambassadors of God's Kingdom.

We practice our prayer and our 'holy no's' now. Because in those moments when God calls us, we want to be ready to turn to God and say a 'holy YES.'