

Coming back together (16B) (Mark 6:30-34, 53-56)

We may all be in a phase of reorientation for a while.

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As I write this, the congregation where I am a member is planning to begin small outdoor gatherings soon. By the time this is posted in a few months, I don't know where we will be in the transition from online to in-person ministry.

I suspect we will all be in a phase of reorientation, adaptation, and adjustment for a while, even after things "return to normal." Whatever the case may be for your congregation, dear reader, I hope the wisdom and encouragement I've found in the reading from Mark 6 for this moment is helpful to you whenever it finds you.

The story begins with the disciples coming back together again with Jesus after a time of separation. Some time before, Jesus broke up the band, sending the disciples out two at a time to proclaim repentance, free those captive to demons, and heal the sick.

He sent them without much notice and with no special equipment or preparation, other than knowing him and witnessing what he did when he went out on the road. They didn't know what to expect from that unusual time, and often they missed the company of the other disciples. But they got through it.

Here's what happens when they get back together:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

I’m struck by the way Jesus welcomes the disciples back into community here: he listens.

The stories pour out of them—some of the disciples may be elated and proud of what they were able to do, some are carrying the weight of the more difficult moments they experienced on their journey, and some (or maybe all of them) are sorting through a jumble of mixed emotions as they reflect on what they have been through. They need to talk about it all. So Jesus, the teacher and storyteller, gives them the floor and listens.

As our congregations return to gathering in person, I wonder if people might need to tell stories of all that the past year has brought them and to hear stories of what the year brought someone else. What would that look like in your context? How can you set the table for people to gather and bring all the good and hard moments of pandemic life to Jesus, to tell their stories, to listen, and to be heard?

After listening to the disciples’ stories, Jesus invites them to take time together for some holy rest. Once the doors of your congregations open, I imagine there may be a great deal of excitement, and perhaps an eagerness to restart *all of the things*, all at once, or to immediately start the new things leaders have been dreaming about over the past year.

I suspect that, for some people, returning to the normal of full schedules might be overwhelming after a year of staying at home. For some, the mandated shutdown of social calendars may have been a needed break in overscheduled lives, and they may not *want* to return to a full schedule. I wonder how leaders and congregations can recognize, honor, and support the varied needs people may have for holy rest in this time of transition.

Finally, Jesus’ plan for the disciples to rest and reflect together for a while doesn’t come to pass in the way he seems to have intended. They end up surrounded by crowds of people seeking healing and nourishment—and Jesus rolls with it. He doesn’t push the crowds aside in order to stick to his plan; he teaches and feeds and heals whoever shows up. As your congregation returns to in-person gatherings, who

do you think might show up seeking healing from your community? How can you be attentive to unexpected needs that arise and ready to respond with compassion, like Jesus?

Whatever the next few months look like for our congregations, we can trust that Jesus will be with us, gathering us in, listening to our stories, inviting us to rest, teaching and healing and feeding us, and sending us out all over again.