



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

February 19, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 61

Gospel Lesson

Mark 6: 30-34

Come Away With Me

We live in a world of averages. For instance, The average American spends one entire year of his or her life watching TV commercials. Americans spend an average of six hours a week shopping and 40 minutes playing with their children.

Men who kiss their wives daily live an average of 5 years longer than married men who do not regularly kiss their wives. The average American will spend 434 hours - 18 DAYS - in their car this year.

A man has six items in his bathroom: a toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving cream, razor, a bar of soap and a towel from the Holiday Inn. The average number of items in the typical woman's bathroom is 337. A man would not be able to identify most of these items.

The average child laughs over 400 times a day. Scientists tell us that for adults to remain healthy, we need to laugh at least 50 times a day. And as far as church life, on average 82% of Americans pray in a given week with women praying more. On average 40% of people read their Bible once a week, 20% adults attend service once a week, and 24% adults engage in volunteer work in church

All these averages, all these numbers, all these comparisons. We are so often graded, classified, categorized so much of the time according to the average, the norm. In other words what the majority of people do, say, believe we seem to be compared to. And while politicians claim to be for the average person, advertisers reach out to the average consumer, pollster try to figure out what the average person thinks, it makes us think that being average doesn't seem to be so bad. But just think about someone above average in height trying to sit in an airline seat designed for the average height of a person, 5' 11".

The fact is that while we might categorize and compare one another according to what we consider average. When it comes to our faith life, to our relationship with Christ, to our discipleship there is no average.

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We don't worship an average God and we are not called to be just average Christians. Because if we did worship an average God, then instead of creating the world in six days God would have taken a leisurely month. Instead of continually reaching out to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob given all their disobedience, an average God would have given up and moved on to someone easier to deal with. Instead of ten commandments, an average God would be happy with five. Instead of a resurrection, an average God would have settled for no cross at all. But what a joy that we don't serve an average God but an above average, extraordinary, almighty God who exceeds our expectations, who does not know any limits, who continually creates and makes a way when we see none, who is always calling us and offering us as ordinary and average human beings an incredible gift of a new and abundant life.

That is what we see at the start of today's passage from Mark where a crowd of average, typical Galileans see Jesus and the disciples going across the sea, so 5,000 of them dash around the lake to meet him.

As soon as Jesus steps out of the boat, he's greeted like a rock star. The crowd swarms around him, and he sees their need for direction and protection and healing. Then he has a reaction that comes as kind of a surprise — Mark tells us, in the original Greek of the gospel, that Jesus takes it in the gut. He has a deep, powerful, physical feeling in his gut when he sees the crowd. He has intense and overwhelming compassion for them, because they are wandering through life like sheep without a shepherd, and his feelings for them come from the very core of his being. He doesn't just think about them, he *feels* for them. In his heart.

This feeling, this compassion he has — it's for the crowd. The average Galilean. The typical person. You see, Jesus had a thing for ordinary people. So he takes action. Jesus begins to teach them, feed them, and heal the sick throughout the region.

He knows how much we are hurting, whether we show it to the world or not. He is moved by the pain of a computer specialist who has just been fired ... by the fear of a child who is being secretly abused by a parent ... by the disorientation of a woman who has just lost her husband of 46 years ... by the hunger of a baby who is put to bed every evening without enough food to eat ... by family members in shock and grief at losing loved ones who went to see a midnight movie of Batman.

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Jesus is moved with compassion for those who need healing of body, mind and spirit, just as he was moved by the suffering of lepers and demoniacs during his earthly ministry.

And Jesus calls us to be moved as well but more than to be moved to be his hands and feet and voice and heart as the body of Christ to care, to reach out, to bind up the brokenhearted, and extend mercy and forgiveness into the world. But here's the question: where do we get the energy, the passion, the strength? Our days are filled to the brim with activities, appointments, obligations. Added to that the needs and hurts of this world can be so overwhelming, so painful, so heart wrenching that we can feel so small, so ordinary, so average. And we wonder, "What difference could we possibly make?"

That is precisely when we need to hear Jesus' call in the beginning of our Gospel lesson to "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." Not to hide out. Not to run away from our problems. Jesus calls us to come away for a time to gain a greater focus for us to engage the world. For our faith life to really mean anything we need to spend time at the source being connected and renewed through our regular prayer life, by taking time to rest our body and soul, to be refreshed as we breathe in the spirit to sustain us and guide us.

For those of you who fly you know the spiel about safety given at the beginning of a flight. The most creative interpretation I ever heard was on one particular flight where the steward wanted to make sure people listened and so he said, "Now, if we lose pressure, oxygen masks will fall from the ceiling please put them on yourselves first before helping anyone else, and then parents please put the mask on your favorite child first before proceeding to the next one."

And I will tell you that he got everyone's attention. While he was just kidding about the order of putting the masks on other people, the basics of what he said are true. In that situation, you have to put the oxygen mask on first. If a mother tried to put the masks on her children first, she would probably get it on the first one, maybe the second, but by the third child both her and the child would be dead. This is not a call to selfishness, but a call to the reality that we can't serve, or help, or be there for other people unless we first put on the oxygen mask.

We need to follow Jesus' example of taking time to "come away" to pray, to rest, to be connected so that his compassion flowed directly from the source of God's heart. Our tiredness, our fatigue, our weariness will remain so long as we

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give a piece of ourselves away to everyone first, before taking the time to be renewed. Until we first are centered and breathing in deeply the spiritual oxygen of our faith.

And our spiritual oxygen is first and foremost prayer. Prayer is the means by which we are revitalized through our relationship and connection with Jesus Christ. Daily prayer is as life giving as the very air we breathe every moment of every day of our lives. I always think of Jesus who being perfect and holy never should have needed to pray. And yet, he often went off to pray by himself. Now, if Jesus needed time to pray and rest and recharge then so do we.

I am the first to confess my own inability to take time to rest and just be. And I am convicted that none of us are called to a life of constant activity but to a life where our faith is being continually formed and shaped. And this happens only when we regularly take the time to breathe, when we take the time to be in prayer, in study, in conversation and relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. Because none of us can truly be spiritually, emotionally, physically rested and healthy, none of us can truly reach out to the world in a faithful way unless we take the time to first put on the oxygen mask of our own faith and breathe.

I call us as a church to find time to care for our souls. Let us make the time [each day] to come away to pray and breathe and get connected to the Holy Spirit so that from our deep connection we can come to our broken world to show the compassion, forgiveness, and love of Christ from our guts and hearts.

You see we can think of ourselves as just a little dot in the world. Each little piece seems so unconnected. One piece is bright red, another cold blue or dull green, another warm purple, another sharp yellow, another shining gold. Some look precious, others ordinary. As individual average dots, we can do little with them except compare them and judge their beauty and value. When, however, all these little dots are brought together in one big mosaic portraying the face of Christ, who would ever question the importance of any one of them? If one of them, even the least spectacular one, is missing, the face is incomplete. Together in the one mosaic, each little dot is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. That's community, a fellowship of ordinary people who together make God's love and hope visible in the world.

Because in this place we are not just average, we are a people of faith – heirs of an extraordinary God who heals our hurts, transforms our lives, reveals to

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us our larger purpose and mission. I call upon all of us to realize we as disciples and a church are capable of so much more. In Psalms we hear these words – When my heart is overwhelmed lead me to the rock that is higher than I – In other words – God says to us, I love you for who you are and who you are becoming as you let my grace and love transform you. I invite us this day to go higher. To the one who takes us above our pains and hurts – not to escape but to heal, transform – and with new focus engage the world in an even greater way. For with God's strength and vision we are capable of many more ministries to reach out to this community, we are capable of letting God's mission and vision of defending the weak, standing up for the oppressed, resisting evil, sharing the Good News of salvation, of living changed lives of grace and holiness. We are capable of so much more if we are willing to journey and go higher with Christ. To realize that the extraordinary God of the resurrection is still bringing about new beginnings all around us – and calling us to come away to be renewed and recharged so that we may receive and share this above average new life of grace and hope and love. Amen.