

Pentecost 9—B
Mark 6:30-34
Gather and Scatter

I believe it is very easy for us to lose our proper focus and to keep right priorities. You know that about yourself, right? We lose focus and boggle priorities when it comes to our time. Have you ever stayed up way later than you should have watching a show, or reading Facebook, or playing a video game? That was time that could have been used getting in shape at the gym, or hanging out with family and friends, or volunteering at church. Poor focus and jumbled priorities. Instead, the time is lost, and your quality of life the next day is poorer because you're overtired.

We lose focus and boggle priorities when it comes to money. You finance a car you really can't afford. You eat out regularly when you could eat at home. The TV package you have is a stretch to pay for. Meanwhile, there's not enough money left for more important things.

But imagine this: what if you could keep your life in balance? What if you had a laser sharp focus? What if your priorities were all straight and your decisions were all in line with those properly aligned values and priorities?

In our reading today, Jesus shows us how to keep that balance, how to stay in focus, and how to keep our priorities properly ordered. He does this

- 1) by showing what is most important in life. It is your relationship with Jesus, who makes you right with the Father that you may enjoy his love and favor now and forever.
- 2) And this is what's important for everyone! That means a close second to your relationship with Jesus is the relationship with Jesus of everyone around you. Your words and actions have influence with others. You can show a person the devastating effects of living out of alignment with God. And you can lead them to Jesus for his restoration, forgiveness and peace. Doesn't it make sense that this would be one of our highest priorities in life?
- 3) Now the question I really want to zero in on is this: How do you keep relationship to Jesus—yours and others—the highest priority?

I believe the answer is in our reading today if you'll pay careful attention. We live in a world of distraction. What we learn today will help us cut through the noise and have razor sharp focus on what God wants us to focus on. It will help us reprioritize our lives on what God wants as our highest priorities.

So let's look at brief portion of Scripture. When I read it you get the feeling that it's incomplete. In fact, it feels more like a bridge between two stories. And it kind of is. The story before is Jesus sending out the twelve to preach and heal in his name. The story after is the feeding of the 5,000. These verses we are looking at seem like a transition or a bridge between the "real" stories. Yet we will see today that there is much for us to learn on this bridge. It helps us see the pattern or rhythm of the Christian's life. Greatly helps us set priorities by identifying what is most important.

"The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught" (30). So Jesus had sent them out the twelve disciples on a short mission trip. He sent them to nearby towns and villages in pairs. They would preach to people that they should repent of their sins. They pointed people to Jesus. They were given authority and power to drive out demons and heal people. What was clearly the priority for Jesus? To preach repentance and forgiveness to the lost. He sent the disciples out to do this in his name. And they did. The

results were amazing. People heard the message and they repented of sin and trusted Jesus. Demons were cast out. Sick people were healed. So go! Tell! Preach! We all know this already, but how are we doing? Is this your personal focus and priority? Or are you distracted by other things? You are, aren't you? So how do we keep this mission focus? Listen!

"The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught." The disciples scattered to share the good news. But then they gathered around Jesus. It's worth repeating. They gathered around Jesus. Together. This part was vitally important if they were going to keep their focus and not get distracted. Then Jesus reaffirms the importance of this: *"There were so many people coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat"* (31). He said to them: ["What are you even doing here? I sent you out! Why have you come back! Go! Don't ever come back again! Go and preach the good news!" No! That's not what Jesus said. He said this:] *"Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while"* (31). This time with Jesus truly was important. It was also a priority. As important as it was to scatter and take the good news to those who didn't know it, it was also a high priority to spend time together, gathered around Jesus. When so many people kept crowding around them that they couldn't get any rest, Jesus invited his disciples on a retreat with him.

And his invitation had four parts: *"Come."* This wasn't just about getting some down time... it was about time with Jesus. Jesus didn't tell them to take a week's vacation and then meet back at Capernaum for their next job assignment. Their rest needed to be with Jesus.

"By yourselves." In other words, Jesus wanted them to be away from the crowds. Each disciple personally needed time with Jesus to be refilled by him and his Word.

"To a secluded place." They needed a place without distractions and interruptions—a place where they could focus on Jesus and his Word without thinking about a million other things. They needed to find a place to isolate themselves from the rest of the world for a bit and focus only on Jesus and his teaching.

"And rest a while." Their bodies physically needed rest. They needed time to rest and recharge, to get energy levels back, to quietly reflect and consider.

So what is Jesus reminding us? Yes, we need to keep before us the priority of reaching the lost with the good news of Jesus. We can only do that when we scatter. We can't huddle here at church all the time and expect the unchurched to come knocking down our doors. We must scatter and take Jesus out to them.

But the way we keep this priority is by intentionally taking time to gather again regularly. Like the disciples, we must come to Jesus regularly—together—with other believers. We need personal time with Jesus. We need a quiet place like a church, or our bedroom, or a break room at our place of employment. Time when we can withdraw from the world for a bit and hang around Jesus for a time and listen to his teaching and grow in our faith.

We need to schedule periods of rest in our week—time where we cease from work. And when we do that, we aren't to empty our mind, but focus our mind on Jesus, and his Word and his teaching and all that we know about him.

Taking this time to gather together around Jesus is something that's becoming more and more rare today. People are too busy. Too many important things going on. There is a new trend among church-goers—and by that I mean those that consider themselves active followers of Jesus actively involved in a congregation. The trend is that they don't go to church every week. There's this thought creeping in, especially among the younger generation that every other week is sufficient, or ever third week.

Jesus is warning us today that we dare not get too scattered. Hebrews 10:25 says: *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* We can’t shortchange this time with gathering together around Jesus. We need this rest, this recharge, this refreshment with Jesus. We need to take the time to gather.

But it’s actually possible to go to the other extreme. That we are so focused on gathering, we forget about the mission Jesus has given us. Listen to the rest: *“They went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. But many people saw them leave and knew where they were going. They ran there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them”* (32-33). The disciples were probably keyed up for some down time, a little vacation. But it didn’t turn out that way. They had a little alone time with Jesus in the boat, but that was all the rest they would get. When they landed on the other side, a large crowd had already gathered. People watched where Jesus’ boat was going and they followed around the lake on land, and when Jesus landed, there was a crowd already gathered.

“When Jesus stepped out of the boat, he saw a large crowd” (34). [He was mildly annoyed and said: “Thank you all for coming, but there will be no teaching or healings today. I am on vacation. Please return in one week!” No, that’s not what Jesus said.] It says: *“His heart went out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He began to teach them many things”* (34). Once again, the highest priority comes to the surface. Before Jesus were lost souls. People who didn’t know how to get right with God. They were sinners who were separated from God and were lost. They needed guidance and instruction. Jesus thought they looked like wandering, aimless sheep. No one was caring for their spiritual needs. They didn’t know where to find forgiveness, peace, joy, contentment. They were pressed down and they needed relief from guilty consciences. Jesus was just the shepherd to lead and guide them... to show them the green pastures and quiet waters. Vacation plans would have to be put on hold. There was something more important to do to—lead the lost.

So here’s the danger we also have to watch out for. The one we already talked about, and that is that we fail to gather enough. We become worldly, distracted, and we can fall away. But the opposite is also dangerous, that we gather and we huddle in a circle excluding all others. We have our group, and we’re comfortable with our group. We’ll make decisions in the interest of our group, and we’ll make sure to do things that protect our group. It’s possible that in our gathering we lose our mission focus. We become less and less outsider-focused and more and more insider-focused.

Jesus vividly demonstrated for his disciples that he, the perfect Son of God, did not have that problem. When faced with the decision of teaching the outsiders or spending time with his insiders, Jesus chose the outsiders. The disciples already knew Jesus. They were already connected to him. They were already clean. They were already being guided. But the crowds before him had none of that. So his heart went out to them. And he taught them.

I believe every one of us has something to repent of right now. I have three things, and perhaps you even need to repent of all three in some ways.

- 1) Our priorities are messed up, and reaching the lost is not on our list, or at least isn’t very high. It isn’t good to give little thought to leading people out of sin, and leading them to Jesus for forgiveness.
- 2) Gathering is not a high priority. Going to church is an occasional thing when it fits in your schedule. Time in Bible study and prayer is frequently missed because of other things. IT is not good when we are in danger of scattering for good, and not returning to Jesus.

3) Gathering is such a high priority that we lose sight of the lost, the shepherdless, the wandering. Our thoughts are mostly directed inward. We consider first what's comfortable for us. It is not good when we fail to have the compassion for the lost that Jesus had.

Which of these do you need to repent of? When God looks that the attitude of our heart and the pattern of our life, what makes him sad? Confess those sins to God. There is no excuse. Be filled with sorrow that your sin has offended your God who made you.

But then I want you to direct your eyes back to Jesus. He had compassion on you. He has seen that you are like a sheep without a shepherd. He invites you to place your trust in him, for he is the perfect Son of God who came to us in human flesh. He knows your weakness and he has compassion on you. He knows your tendency to scatter too far. He knows your tendency to gather and exclude. He knows your messed up priorities. And he forgives you. And he does so at great personal cost. Jesus your perfect substitute went to the cross for you. He took your burden of sin upon himself, and he paid the penalty for it—suffering and then death. He shed his blood for you, and died to remove the penalty of your sin. His sacrifice was pleasing to the Father, and by his wounds and shed blood, you are healed. You are forgiven. You are made right with God.

Friends, let's go today and reorder the priorities in our life. To do this, I'd like you to do exactly what was modeled in our text today. Gather and scatter. Retreat to Jesus and his Word then go and proclaim it. Recharge then discharge. Rest and work. Receive then give. Time with Jesus, time sharing Jesus with others. This is the cycle of the Christian life that keeps your priorities straight and your life focused. This is the cycle that keeps your own faith strong and growing, and gives you the boldness and focus to share that faith with others.

Today we have gathered. Next we will scatter, but as you do, look for the unchurched people that God puts in your path today, tomorrow, the rest of this week. They are there. They are lost. They are like sheep without a shepherd. Have compassion on them. Lead them to Jesus that they may live. Then let's gather together around Jesus next week, and share with him and each other what Jesus accomplished through us with his word of grace and truth. In fact, over the course of the next year, let's commit to doing this at least 52 more times! Amen.

Hymns: 336, 338