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Sermon for July 18, 2021

What to Do When the World Is Spinning

I don't know how you all are doing, but to me right now things are just a little weird. Almost overnight so much changed with Covid restrictions. Every new place we go we have to figure out if and what protocols are in place. We're emerging back into life, and yet everything's a little different than it was before. Products that used to be available without question are out of stock, backordered, or more expensive. Many stores and restaurants are understaffed. At one place I went to, someone came out and said, "We're so sorry we're operating at 15% of the staff we need, they've been working for the last 18 hours. We appreciate your understanding." In other places, appointments and surgeries that you used to be able to get right away are now booking months out. And if you're trying to arrange childcare for the fall, chances are you've found yourself on a waitlist.

With all of these changes happening in such a short amount of time — trying to keep up with what to expect and what to do where — it's felt like being on one of those rides at the fair. The one where you're standing up while it spins up and down and sideways. The ride stops but everything is still spinning. And yet you have to figure out how to get yourself off the ride somehow.

As we read about the experiences of Jesus and the disciples, I have to think it was similarly disorienting. Think of the way life was spinning for them: They became famous overnight. Going from fishermen to frontmen. Totally changing roles and doing it nonstop. Like in our passage today from Mark. The disciples had just got back from healing and casting out demons. Jesus tells them to rest after all this work. But on their way to rest, people spot them. They get a short break, but it's all there still waiting for them. There is no end to the need. How did they keep up in those intense years of ministry?

As we see in the passage, they had Jesus reminding them. Guiding them to rest, sit down and break bread, take time for relationships, center themselves in spiritual texts and prayer. He was their shepherd directing them along the way. By contrast, the reading says those coming to Jesus and the disciples were like sheep without a shepherd. Aimless. Hurting and not sure where to go. Jesus saw what they were going through and felt for them.

Jesus, of course, was able to stay grounded and on track by looking to God. He maintained a constant communion with God. Perhaps something that was developed in those 40 challenging days out in the wilderness. It was that oneness with God and 24/7 Communion that makes Jesus the Christ: God incarnate; God fully expressed as a human. It was by being deeply centered in God that he could hold up to all the pressures and continue to give of himself and serve, and have compassion for everyone to the very end.

The disciples looked to Jesus, and Jesus looked to God. Having the right focus allowed them to do what they did.

How about for us? When life is spinning around us, which it always is — if it wasn't Covid transitions it would be something else — what do we do? How do we manage not get thrown off? Like Jesus, and like the disciples, I believe it comes from keeping the right focus. Keeping fixed on the right point so that even if everything is in constant motion around us, we are in a place of stability.

There's actually a term for this in dance called "spotting." When dancers are making those turns, which often they do quickly in succession, you notice that they always keep their eye on one point. They look at it for as long as possible even as their bodies rotate, and then when they no longer can they whip their heads around back to the point even before their bodies have made the rotation. There is very little time that they're not looking at their point. As a result, they can be spinning and still decide where they are going, what they're doing. They can go in a straight line and not get dizzy, because they are fixed on that point and so even though everything around is spinning, they're ok.

As Christians, we have a similar way of going through life and going through the turns, because Christ is our point. When Christ is the one we keep our focus on, even as everything around us is spinning, we don't have to be whipped around by it. We are not like sheep without a shepherd. We have someone giving us the reference point to keep us where we need to be.

With Christ as our point we are led to where we need to be. We are drawn into rest and refreshment like the disciples in our passage. We have peace amidst the chaos. As it says in Ephesians, Christ is our peace. With Christ as our point we are in the process of being transformed. Again in Ephesians, it says that Christ is creating in Christself a new humanity in place of the divided one, reconciling us to God and to one another so that we might be one. "Putting to death that hostility," it says, "and making us citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

Christ as our point keeps us moving fluidly through the constant movement, but without forgetting who we are or where we're going. In a quickly changing world, setting our focus on Christ changes everything.

What does it look like for us to keep coming back to Christ, like those dancers who keep coming back to their point? What kinds of things help us keep our focus? Or are there things other than Christ that we have made our point — our focus or the thing we look to — but that really shouldn't have that place? And by giving it that place is throwing us off? How might we recalibrate and redirect our attention? We cannot keep the world — or at times our lives — from spinning. But we can keep fixed on our point.