

**“Who Sets the Agenda?”**  
**Mark 1:29–39**  
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Have you ever walked into a meeting, looked at the agenda, and wanted to leave immediately? Sometimes it looks like the agenda is just too long. Sometimes there is an item on the agenda that causes your gut to clench. Other times it’s just that the same item is there yet again and probably the same person is going to drag the whole group down about it yet again. And I’m not just talking about church meetings.

I will never forget the evening Dana came home from her first business meeting at the Winston-Salem Dog Training Club at which she taught, disappointed by the behavior of one man. She had hoped the dog world would be different from the church world, but the problem is the dogs bring people with them. And people are people wherever they are. That’s part of the challenge with any meeting, but another part depends on the agenda such that we have to wonder, “Who gets to set the agenda?” An agenda makes a big difference. Who gets to set it?

This is an important question and not just for meetings but for all of life and faith. Who or what guides our individual journey and our shared life as a church? Is it all just a knee-jerk response to the realities that life throws our way? Has it all been planned out in detail by some sovereign force or being beyond us, either fate or God? Or do we have a voice in our own story, agency over our life, influence on our path?

There are many ways to address this question of who sets the agenda — philosophical, psychological, and pragmatic ways. But in the church, we look to Jesus as a guide in all things. Who sets the agenda for him? Today’s reading from Mark 1 provides some clues.

At first, it may appear that Jesus allows others to set the agenda. Again and again, he simply responds to the people he meets along the way in the natural rhythm of life. In last week’s reading from Mark, he goes into the synagogue in Capernaum to teach but encounters a man

with an unclean spirit, and the rest of the narrative plays out as a response to this man's need and the spirit's outcries.

Today's reading picks up the story with Jesus and his first four disciples leaving the synagogue and going to the house of Simon and Andrew. Whatever Jesus has in mind, Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever and Jesus heals her. Then, with word having spread, people from all over town who are sick or who are possessed come to Jesus and he cures the sick and casts out the demons. Everything Jesus does seems to be not the result of careful planning but a response to the people he meets. He is sensitive to their needs, but they are setting the agenda.

Though this is not the whole story for Jesus, there is wisdom in this approach to life. It can be liberating to realize that we don't have to have everything planned out, we don't have to be controlled by the Google Calendar or the Apple Watch buzzing on our wrist. Being responsive to the needs of people we encounter is a Christlike practice, and spontaneity and flexibility are spiritual gifts.

I say this, confessing that I am a planner. Many things benefit from planning, and as with jazz, the best improvisation comes in the context of practice. But some things cannot be planned for, and some of the best experiences in life are not orchestrated. What and who do we miss with a tightened-up approach? We can spend so much time planning an outreach project that we walk right past the people on our doorstep. We can organize our lives so efficiently that we forget to live.

A friar in a monastery in Nebraska put it this way.

If I had to live my life over, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax, I would limber up, I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I know of very few things I would take seriously. I would be less hygienic. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers and watch more sunsets. I would eat more ice cream. I would have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I am one of those people who lives prophylactically and sensibly and sanely, hour after hour, day after day... I have been one of those people who never go anywhere without a

thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had it to do over again, I would go places and do things and travel lighter than I have...

If I had my life to live over again... I would ride on more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies. (*Bread for the Wilderness, Wine for the Journey*, John Killinger, p. 69).

Jesus does not pick a lot of daisies, but he does make room for spontaneity. His ministry is not all carefully planned.

But while it may seem like Jesus simply responds to the needs of others and thus allows them to set the agenda, this is not the whole story. He is sensitive to the needs of others, and he is flexible and spontaneous at times, but he is also self-differentiated, self-directed, and self-defined. He makes his own decisions about where he goes and what he does.

In this story, after he heals many people, he goes out before dawn and spends time in prayer. The disciples eventually find him, telling him everyone is searching for him. Surely there are more people in need of his help. But Jesus tells them it is time to move on to the neighboring towns so that he can proclaim his message in them too. And this is exactly what he does. He preaches and heals throughout the region.

Jesus will not be taken anywhere he does not want to go. He will not be forced to do anything he does not want to do. The story of his temptations in the wilderness makes this clear. He knows who he is and what he is called to do. He responds to needs but in his own way.

There is wisdom in this approach for us too, in being self-differentiated, in being clear about our identity and calling. Being sensitive to the needs of others is Christlike, but we can also have our lives controlled by other parties like employers, overzealous friends, our children and their constant demands, the messages of our culture about what we have to have and do to be successful and happy. And as a church, we can be tempted to swallow unreflectively the advice of others who know what a “successful” church must do or not do. We are wise to set our own agenda, to make our choices in life, to discern our own path as a community of faith with distinctive gifts, challenges, and callings.

And yet, this is not the whole story either. Jesus isn't just self-defined; he is God-centered. He doesn't set the agenda all by himself. He sets it with God's guidance. In our text, he responds to many people in need, but then he goes off by himself before dawn to spend time in prayer, to center his life in God. The disciples not only don't know where he is, they don't understand the value of what he is doing. The text says literally that they "hunt him down" (*katedioxen*).

"Everyone is searching for you," they say, there is work to do... But what Jesus is doing now is work, critical work. Even for the One in whom God dwells, there is a need to spend time in quiet, focusing on the Holy. For Jesus, this is essential. God sets the agenda, perhaps not in a directive way, controlling every detail, but God sets the agenda.

The message for us is that while it is wise to be sensitive to the needs of others yet also self-defined, what is most important is that our lives are shaped by Divine intent. There is no way to download a God Plan for our individual lives or the church, but we can open ourselves to God's guidance through certain habits of faith – prayer, the reading of scripture, the practice of meditation, journaling. And we can simply have a genuine longing for God's guidance. The prophet Isaiah says that those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. Our calling is to wait, to seek God's guidance. We may not always understand it or follow it perfectly, but God will honor our desire to do so.

Thomas Merton put it this way.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. (*Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 79)

So do we.

Who sets the agenda for us? God does, if we will allow God, in the context of our self-defined discernment and sensitivity to others.