

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF!

(10/24/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Mark 1:35-39; 6:30-44, 53-56

*“In the morning, while it was still dark, he [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” (Mk 1:35)*

*“He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.” (Mk 6:31-32)*

This morning we are continuing our exploration of the Gospel According Mark by exploring a passage that speaks to me in a special way. As you will note, after several months we are still on the first chapter of this gospel. This may explain why, in the twenty-four years that I have been here, we have yet to work our way through the entire Bible! We don't rush into things in this church!

Mark's depiction or picture of Jesus is different from that conveyed, for example, by the Gospel of John. Mark's gospel is a gospel of action, while John's is a gospel of words. Mark presents Jesus as one whose ministry is characterized by a succession of mighty works. Mark believes that Jesus' authority is more fully revealed in what he *does* than in what he *says*. These mighty works, for all who have eyes to see, are signs of the presence of God's power and God's kingdom in Jesus. The miraculous healings help people sense or realize or believe that God is with Jesus in a very powerful, a very special way.

This distinction between Jesus' teachings and his actions can help us understand some of the passages we have already read in Mark. For example, a few weeks ago we read the passage where Jesus, after he cast out demons, forbade the demons to speak “because they knew him.” Why didn't Jesus want these exorcized demons to give testimony to his power over them? On several other occasions, when Jesus heals people, he tells them not to tell anyone what he has done. Why wouldn't he want these people to share what God had done in their lives? Why was he reluctant to receive what we would regard as good publicity?

I don't think that Jesus was just being humble. I think it is more a matter of his growing awareness of his call. As we heard this morning, Jesus says to his disciples, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; *for that is what I came out to do.*”

“For that [proclaiming the message] is what I came out to do.” There is no doubt that Jesus healed people; he incarnated the archetype of the healer. He was also a teacher; he taught people about the spiritual path that he called “the Way;” he taught them and showed them what it

means to be in the kingdom of God. Of these two forms of ministry: healing and teaching, which was the more important to Jesus? Which is the more important to us?

The healings are certainly more dramatic; they bear visual testimony to the power of God in Jesus. However, the healings were something that was done *to* people. Healings don't necessarily transform people from the inside out, the way teachings can. For example, if Jesus were to heal me of some physical or mental affliction, my affliction would be removed, but I would not necessarily experience a new way of being in the world. My healing would do something good for *me*, whereas *Jesus' message calls me to do something good for others*.

Jesus, who has just performed two miraculous healings, tells his disciples that although he is a healer, he is more than a healer. He is first and foremost a teacher. It is unfortunate that Mark, with his emphasis on Jesus' deeds, fails to grasp this. Mark describes each healing in detail, including word-for-word conversations between the person and Jesus. However, Mark tells us little about what Jesus taught. For example, he says, Jesus "entered the synagogue and taught." Taught what? I just wish that Mark had deigned to give us a little more of Jesus' actual message, his actual words, the way John does fifty years later.

We note that one of Mark's favorite words is "immediately." This word occurs forty times in sixteen chapters. From the constant action that Mark depicts, it appears that Jesus and his disciples are constantly on the go. As we heard this morning, Jesus has sent his disciples out on their mission to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to call people to repent, and to heal the sick. They return. They report on what they have experienced and what they have accomplished.

Jesus tells them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while."

"Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." The disciples have been busy. They have been doing good things. They have been helping people in important ways. They have been teaching people about the kingdom of God, healing them of various diseases, and driving out demons. But they have apparently not been taking care of themselves. They have not even taken the time to eat. I suspect they also have not set aside time to pray.

Jesus knows that the disciples are fired with enthusiasm for the mission that he has entrusted to them. They want to do what he asks of them, and they want to do it well. They may even want to do it perfectly. But they are just human beings. They can only do so much. When they try to do more than can realistically be expected, they run the risk of burnout.

The symptoms of burnout are easy to identify--from the outside. It is far more difficult for the person approaching burnout to realize what is happening. This is because burnout happens incrementally. It is also because most of us who experience burnout are deeply committed to the tasks we have undertaken. We don't want to entertain the possibility that we cannot do them, or that we cannot do them in the way we originally envisioned. We find it difficult to ask for help. We even find it difficult to accept help when it is freely offered.

Well-intentioned people who experience burnout become depressed, though they may not realize it. They lose a sense of joy. They lose hope for the future. They complain a lot. They may have psychosomatic symptoms. They become easily annoyed. They lose emotional flexibility in dealing with relationships. They lose cognitive flexibility in dealing with complex situations. They feel overwhelmed. They begin to think of what they are doing as a chore, as drudgery. They are no longer able to grasp the profound truth that was expressed by the Lebanese poet and mystic Kahlil Gibran, who taught that "work is love made visible."

Jesus calls his disciples to step back from their ministry to take care of themselves. He calls them to step back from the people who are pressing in on them. He calls them to experience the psychological and spiritual renewal of Sabbath.

Later, in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, we read that Jesus and his disciples leave the crowds and head off to a lonely place. However, the crowds see them going. The crowds are not sensitive to the disciples' need for a time of refreshing. They are too caught up in their own needs to be concerned for the mental health of those that are serving as caretakers. They just want to be healed! The disciples are learning that if you leave it up to those for whom you care to monitor your mental status, to recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout, you will have a long wait! Jesus teaches them that they need to take care of themselves.

The people's need for healing is great, although it is possible that they only *perceive* it as great. They are so concerned with their own problems that they do not feel the need to take care of Jesus or his disciples. They not only follow the little band that is heading off on retreat; they race ahead and are waiting for them when they arrive!

When I read this passage of scripture, I think about years of coming in the door at the end of a long day. I feel tired, drained. My wife, children, and dogs are all lined up waiting for me, happy to see me. But they all want something! They are clamoring for attention, sometimes even competing for attention, wanting to share their day with me, wanting help with some problem or situation. I think, "Can't you just let me take off my coat? Can't you let me change my clothes? Can't I just get a glass of wine?"

Jesus is more understanding than I am! He is more compassionate. He is more patient. When the people are hungry, he feeds them. When they are sick, he heals them. He lets them touch him. According to scripture, he does not become impatient, discouraged, depressed, or angry. It is interesting, however, that in the 1960's rock opera "Jesus Christ, Superstar," Jesus becomes worn down by the demands that are made on him. At one point, totally overwhelmed, he screams at the crowd that is pressing in on him, "Heal yourself!" He also allows Mary Magdalene to minister to him, a precursor of this special relationship many years before Dan Brown's suggestive novel, *The DaVinci Code*.

It's probably not a good idea to compare ourselves with Jesus. It would be more realistic for us to compare ourselves with his disciples. Jesus is wise. He knows human beings. He knows human nature. He does not *suggest* to his disciples that they take care of themselves; he *commands* them to do so!

Jesus is a good therapist. He knows how to prevent burnout. He knows how to cure it when it happens. He tells the disciples they need to practice self-care. They need to restore the lost balance in their lives. They need to balance work with recreation, with re-creation, to balance extraversion with creative introversion, to balance time spent with others with time alone. They need to balance their sensitivity to the needs of others with a sensitivity to their own deepest needs.

We twenty-first century Christians are like the disciples. We may not be driving out demons or healing the sick, but we are involved in ministry just the same. We may be feeding people literally or emotionally. We may be caring for the seemingly endless needs of our children, an ailing spouse, or our elderly parents or in-laws. This is often in addition to the demands of our work, our professional responsibilities. Jesus' message is directed to young mothers and fathers, to those who are in the "sandwich generation," and to people caring for a spouse whose health or mind is failing. He is speaking to those of us in social work, in medicine, in education, in psychology, in ministry. Jesus' message is addressed to all of us. He calls us to return to what feeds us, to what refreshes us, to what restores us. If we do not do this, we will burn out without even knowing it. When we don't take care of ourselves, a labor of love becomes a burden that we curse.

There are several passages in the gospel of Mark where we read that Jesus steps back, where he withdraws from the crowds. In Mark 1:35, immediately following the calling of the first disciples, the healing of the man with an unclean spirit, and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, we read,

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."*

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus restores himself by going to a deserted place to pray. However, his disciples hunt him down! They seem to question his right to do this, since, as they put it, "everyone is searching for you!"

Time and again Jesus goes apart to pray. Note that he goes, not to his "happy place" but to his "quiet place." He goes off into the desert, into the wilderness. Since he uses this time for prayer, it is probably when he receives guidance from God, when he receives strength from simply being more fully in God's presence.

Jesus calls us to experience the rhythm of Sabbath, to balance our busyness, our constant activity with a time of refreshing. We should not only do this once a week when we observe the Sabbath in church; we should instill this rhythm in our everyday life. We need to build in what feeds us as individuals, whether it is reading, listening to music, talking with friends, talking a walk, enjoying the beauty of nature, or even exercising (I seem to have difficulty putting exercising in this category). We also need to build in what we need as Christians; we need to nourish our spiritual life.

Many of us work hard. We take what we do seriously, whether it is our work, our family responsibilities, or simply being a good friend. We mean well, though sometimes we don't know when to stop. Unfortunately, the brakes are often applied through a heart attack, through an illness, through depression, or as we inflict the symptoms of burnout on those we love.

Jesus reminds us not to become inflated, not to identify with the savior or healer archetype. We are not called to save the world, our children, our spouse, our elderly parents, or our friends. We are only called to do our part. God is the major actor. Like the disciples, we are secondary or tertiary helpers. The destiny, the ultimate care of our loved ones is not in our hands; it is in God's hands.

When I complain that I am too busy to set aside time to pray and meditate, which I often do, (I mean I often complain, not pray and meditate), I am reminded that the Dalai Lama begins each day with four hours of meditation. I am busy, but I must admit that this guy has even more responsibilities than I! He would not think of starting his day in any other way! It is from this time in meditation, this time of opening himself to the inner light, that he draws the strength and wisdom to do all he does during the day--and to do it so well.

We are not only *like* Jesus' disciples; we *are* Jesus' disciples. We come to church to learn about God, about Jesus, and about ourselves. We come to find direction for our lives. But we also come to "get our batteries recharged." We come to experience Sabbath, to experience the rest that refreshes and restores us. Note that I did not say that we come to church to sleep, though this is what some people seem to need! BTW, I just want you to know that I never take offense at people drifting off during my sermon; I just assume that you may be suffering from some kind of sleep disturbance, and you may need your sleep more than you need my brilliant insights!

Whoever we are and whatever burdens we carry, we need to recharge our batteries. We need to experience what the Bible calls "times of refreshing." For an introvert like me, that may mean time alone. For an extravert, it may mean time spent with friends. For most or all of us, it may mean time spent in nature. But more than just "down time," Jesus calls his disciples and us to turn to God for the hope, the courage, the strength, and the wisdom we need to do God's will in the world and in our lives.

By the way, I know how difficult it is during this time of pandemic restrictions to avail ourselves of some of the things that feed us. For example, travel. Darlene and I would really love to visit our family in South Carolina, go to Symphony Hall, or spend some time in some of the cities in Europe that we love. Instead, this past week, we went for a ride and saw the most beautiful sunset either of us had ever seen! I would still rather be wandering around Paris or Vienna or London than driving up Route 495 at sunset, but we need to make the most of the options that are available to us. And there are always more options than we realize.

In this spirit, we gather this morning in this sanctuary, this sacred space. We come acknowledging our need to be fed with ritual, with sacred music, with the words of scripture or the words of our hymns, with prayer for ourselves and others, and even with silence. We come to be nourished by the presence of our Lord both within and among us.

Then, as we leave this sanctuary, we need to remember the charge that Jesus gave to his disciples and which he also gives to us: "You are called to take care of the needs of the world. However, in the process of doing this, don't forget to take care of yourself."

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