

February 5, 2006/Fifth Sunday after Epiphany/David L. Edwards

Call and the Inward Journey

Mark 1:29-39 *Jesus answered, "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."*

Jesus has healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of her fever. The evening of that day, people bring to Jesus many others who are sick or demon-possessed. Jesus heals many of them. Then after catching a little sleep, Jesus gets up before dawn and steals away to a deserted place to be alone with God. But his prayers are interrupted by the disciples who seek him out and tell him that others are looking for him. It is implied that there are plenty more people who need help and the disciples think Jesus should get back to them.

Instead Jesus says it is time to move on to the next towns. He hasn't healed everyone in Capernaum. He hasn't cast out all the demons. But he has proclaimed the message of God's dawning reign and demonstrated the power of that reign in the healings and exorcisms. Now it is time to go other places and proclaim this same message, calling people to change their lives and live the life of God's kingdom, the ways of justice, peace, compassion, forgiveness. This is why I came out, says Jesus. This is my calling, my vocation. The healings and exorcisms are part of it, but the main thing is the message, the good news of God's reign that can liberate people, unite them with God, and set them on a path of loving service in the world.

Jesus didn't heal everyone or cast out all the demons. He didn't meet everyone's need. He was focused on what he believed God had given him to do. And we have benefited from Jesus' having been centered in and focused on his ministry from God—the proclaiming of God's kingdom, his calling of people to follow him in the life of that kingdom, and the way he himself fully embodied what it means to live in and out of God's gracious order for life.

I find this story from Mark's gospel very helpful as we think about our own journeys of faith. We cannot do everything. We cannot respond to every need. If we try, we end up being overwhelmed and not doing very well or going very deeply with regard to any particular need. When Jesus calls us to follow him, it is an invitation to discover and affirm the uniqueness of our own lives. It is an invitation to listen to our own lives and what our inner relationship with God is saying to us about what we have to give to the world. It is an invitation to discover and use the particular gifts God has given us to bring healing, comfort, peace, justice, and beauty to the world. In other words, it is Jesus' call to enter into and live out of the realm of God by simply being who God made us to be and doing what God gives each of us to do.

This is where the inward journey becomes so crucial. The needs around us are many and great. Being compassionate people, we want to respond to everything. Yet if we are not living out of who we really are and what we are given to do, then we become fragmented and overburdened, falling into exhaustion or despair. If we are not in touch with our own lives and gifts then we do not experience and manifest the joy that is meant to illuminate our own lives and touch the lives of those around us.

Gordon Cosby has written that the best way we can call forth the gifts of others is to faithfully use our own gifts. This inspires others to take seriously and cherish their own lives and to embark on the discovery, affirmation, and exercising of their own gifts. When we are making time daily and taking more extended periods of time occasionally for prayer, meditation, and reflection, then we grow in our capacity to discern what is and what is not ours to be and to do. The time we spend in silence, in practicing being present to ourselves and to God, the times we give to retreat—even a day we set aside each month for mindfulness and inner listening—this time is an investment in truly living a life that benefits the world. It is neither selfish nor a withdrawal from responsibility. Quite the opposite. It is the way we cultivate true selflessness and live a truly responsible life.

Saying yes to who we are and what we are given to do also means developing the ability to say no to things that would distract us from our vocation, our calling in life. We frequently say here in our community that call is so central that if there are things we think ought to be done yet no one who is called to do them, then we have to let them go until the right person appears, until that particular call is sounded in the life of someone. That is hard. But it is an important discipline that helps us keep focused on what God calls us each and together to be and to do.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote of the diversity and variety of gifts that God gives to the community for the common good and ministry. It is God who inspires each ministry, and gives each gift. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” says Paul. He likened this to the way our bodies work. The unity and healthfulness of the body is the result of each individual member being itself and doing its own particular work. If that is happening, then all is well. But if the members are caught up in wanting to do everything or doing someone else’s job or devaluing themselves or other members, then the whole thing breaks down. If we find ourselves wanting to be like someone else or like another church, then we are not touching the source of our own life and are not doing the things that God is giving us to do to bring life to us and the world around us.

I think the center of this story from Mark’s gospel is Jesus at prayer, alone with God. It is the turning point, where Jesus, withdrawing for a time from the pressing needs of the world, discerned again and refocused himself on what God had given him to be and to do. That is how God was able to work powerfully through his life. And it is how God is able to work powerfully through our lives. Knowing who God has made us to be and what God has given us to do is the way we live the life of God’s kingdom and the way we let that kingdom dawn in and through us. The inward journey of silence, inner listening, prayer, and reflection is the fountain of the outward journey of doing what God is calling us to do with our lives. The needs of the world are many and great, but they are best met as we discern what it is that God has called us to do and keep ourselves grounded in that call by doing as Jesus

did, going to a deserted place to pray, to be alone with God. Then we can know for ourselves what Jesus knew, what it is that we have come out to do.