

Jesus Moves On

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. Word of it spreads, and by evening people have brought to Jesus many others who are sick or demon-possessed. The text says that the "whole city" came to the door of Simon and Andrew. Jesus heals many of them. Notice that Mark is careful to say "many," not "all." I think he has his reasons. After catching a little sleep, Jesus gets up before dawn and goes to a deserted place to be alone with God. However, his prayers are interrupted by Simon and others. More people need help, and the disciples seem to think that Jesus should get back to them. Here is revealed one of the themes of Mark's gospel—a tension between what people want Jesus to do and what he knows himself called to do, between who people want him to be and who he really is.

Instead of responding to the disciples' request, 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. He has taught about God's dawning reign and demonstrated its power in the healings and exorcisms. Now it is time to go other places with 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, awaken them to their relationship 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 vocation, his call—the proclaiming of God's kingdom, his call 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. We spread ourselves so thin that we do not do very well what we are given to do, or go very deep with regard to meeting 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. 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 story can remind us of what it means to be called, to live on the basis of our "vocation," what we feel God has called us to be and do for the world. It is a story about the importance of remaining focused on that call.

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 most clearly 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, we do not experience and manifest the joy that is meant to illuminate our own lives and touch the lives of those around us.

The best way to call forth the gifts of others is to faithfully use our own gifts. The best way we can liberate others to be the unique and precious persons God made them to be is to be faithful to who God made us to be in our own uniqueness. 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 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. Times of meditation, reflection, and prayer help us to remain focused on our own gifts and call, and to grow in our sense of how faithfulness to our own lives fits within and benefits life around us. The time we spend in silence, in the practice of being present to ourselves and to God, is an investment in living a life that benefits the world. That is what the Sabbath practice was meant to be in Judaism, and how it was initially carried over into Christian practice with Sunday as the "Lord's Day". Here was one day a week to be completely given to remembering that God is the creator and sustainer of life. It was a day to let go of all burdens and become inwardly rested, aware that our lives are absolute gift, not something we somehow have gained for

ourselves. Taking such time for contemplation, rest, silence, awareness 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 means cultivating the ability to say no to things that would distract us from our vocation, our calling in life. One of the core beliefs in our community is 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 embodied in the life of someone. That is hard. It means we have to do without some things. 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 (Ch. 12), 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 get caught up in trying to do everything, or devaluing themselves or other members in a competitive spirit, 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.

If we look deeply into this story and the significance of Jesus moving on from Capernaum when others wanted him to do everything for everyone, we find something radically different from what we are used to. This means that the faith community, the church, does not exist in order to meet our every need. Nor does any other person exist to meet my need. The church gets itself way off track when it tries to be a religious services deliverer, creating a myriad of programs to meet people's needs. Now that sounds strange, doesn't it, for me to say that? Aren't we supposed to meet everyone's need? If we read this story carefully and deeply, the answer is no. The most important thing Jesus did was to call people into the service of God's dawning reign—the kingdom of God. He did not create dependencies on himself. He did not point people to himself but to God and their relationship with God. He knew that was what people most deeply needed—to respond to God's reign, to be living their lives in different, new ways. It was a call to responsibility for one's own life in relationship to God. And that is far more fulfilling and healing than looking to someone or something to meet your need. It means you are drawing water from your own well, the well of your own spirit and your relationship with God.

I think the center of this story is Jesus at prayer, alone with God. It is the turning point, where Jesus, withdrawing 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.