

February 5, 2012 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

### **Jesus Moves On: Faithfulness to Call**

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."*

Visiting the home of his new disciples Simon and Andrew, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. Word spreads, and by evening people have brought to him all who are sick or demon-possessed. The text says that the "whole city" was crowded outside the house. Jesus heals many of them. Notice that Mark says "many," not "all." I think that is important to the story.

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 who have been "hunting" for him. More people need help, and the disciples seem to think that Jesus should get back to them. Here is one of the themes of Mark's gospel—a tension between what people expect of Jesus and what he knows himself called by God to be and do.

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 been teaching about God's dawning reign and has demonstrated its power in the healings and exorcisms. Now it is time to go on to other places with his central purpose--calling people to change their lives, to wake up and live the life of God's kingdom, the ways God created us to live, with justice, peace, compassion, forgiveness, and joy. This is why I came out, says Jesus. This is what I am called to do. The healings and exorcisms are part of it, but the main thing is the good news of God's reign that can liberate people, awaken them to the meaning and joy of their relationship with God, and set them on a path of loving service in the world.

Jesus did not heal everyone or cast out all the demons. He did not try to

meet everyone's needs or expectations. He was focused completely on what he believed God had given him to do. I have come to believe that this is the greatest gift to us of his life. Jesus was centered in and remained focused on his vocation, his call—the proclaiming of God's kingdom, life the way God created it to be, his call us to follow him in the life of that kingdom, and the way he fully embodied what it means to live in and out of God's love for us and the world.

I find this story 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 to discover and affirm the uniqueness of our own lives. It is to listen to our own lives and what our inner relationship with God is telling us about what we have to give to the world. It is a call 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 the importance of knowing and claiming God's call and gifts in our lives, and the importance of remaining focused on our call and gifts.

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 can illuminate our own lives and touch the lives of those around us. The inward journey keeps us rooted and grounded in who we truly are and what we are given to do.

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 make 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. We are able to remain focused on our own gifts and call, and to seeing how faithfulness to our own life 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, self-understanding—in other words, what we call the inward journey—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 calling and the sharing of our gifts. One of the core beliefs in our community is that if there are things we think ought to be done yet no one 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. Yet, this is an important discipline that helps us keep focused on what God calls us each and together to be and to do.

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 every need. 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 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, one’s own call and gifts. It means we learn to draw water from our own well, the well of our own spirit and our relationship with God. Nothing is more truly healing and powerful than that!

This story is saying, I think, that what is truly saving, healing, life-giving to the world is our faithfulness to who God created us to be and what we feel God has called us to do in the service of life. And that will mean a diversity of ministries, or workings of the spirit as Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 12. Paul saw in the Corinthian community what happens when different persons or groups think THEIR thing is the most important and that everyone should be part of it. That impedes the working of God’s spirit, for God’s spirit works through diversity, not uniformity. For this reason, it is an important spiritual practice for us in this community to always cultivate a grateful mindfulness of the diversity of missions we have and the importance of each to remain focused on and to keep nurturing its vision. Chrysalis, The Haven, The Crofters, L’Arche Blue Ridge Mountains, Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, The New Lodge, Genesis, and The St. Francis groups. We honor our own call and gifts and mission. We honor that of others. All are important. All are needed. Each is a way that God’s one spirit is working for the sake of God’s world.

I think the center of this story is Jesus at prayer, alone with God. It is comforting to know that Jesus also had a hard time carving out inward journey time for himself. Yet he did it. It was the source of everything he was and did. Jesus withdrew 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 is the fountain of

the outward journey. 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, as did Jesus, what it is that we have come out to do.