

February 8, 2015 / 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 (Peter) and Andrew, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. Word spreads, and by evening people are bringing to him all the sick and demon-possessed. The text says that the "whole city" crowded outside the house. Jesus heals and casts out demons from many. Notice that Mark says "many," not "all." That is important to the story.

After catching a little sleep, Jesus gets up before dawn, probably between 3 and 4 am, and goes to a deserted place to be alone in prayer. However, his solitude is interrupted by Simon and others who "hunt him down". More people need help, and the disciples think that Jesus is missing opportunities not only to meet peoples' needs but to build a reputation for himself. Here is one of the main themes of Mark's gospel—the difference between what people, including his disciples, expect of Jesus and what he knows himself called to be and do.

Jesus says it is time to move on to the next towns. We begin to see that the healings, the exorcisms, are never the main thing, only demonstrations of his authority. Now it is time to go on to other places with his central mission--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, love, joy, and the freedom that comes with trust (faith) in God's care.

Jesus tells the disciples: "This is what I came out to do". The word here means literally "escape" or "get away". Jesus could mean that the reason he came out to the deserted place was to get away from everything and everyone, to re-center himself in God and God's call in his life. Or simply that his mission, his calling, is the whole reason for his life. I think it was all of that. Jesus 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 may be the greatest gift to us of his life. Jesus was fully centered in and remained focused on his vocation, his call—the proclaiming of God's kingdom, his call to follow him in the life of that kingdom, to live out of our relationship with God, and the particular ways God

calls and gifts us to serve others and the world. We call it life as an inward journey of prayer, in the fullest sense, and an outward journey of loving service.

This story speaks clearly of some important things about living our lives as a journey of faith. We cannot do everything, nor are we called to do so. We cannot respond to every need, nor are we called to do so. If we try, we become overwhelmed, or spread ourselves so thin that we do not do anything very well or go very deeply 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 what our inner relationship with God is telling us about what we have to give to the world. It is a call to embrace and use the particular gifts God has given us to share. It is the call to simply be who God made us to be and do what God gives each of us to do. This story reminds us of the importance of discerning and staying focused on God's call and gifts in our lives, including the gift of the person we are. This is where the inward journey is so crucial. The inward journey keeps us rooted and grounded in who we truly are and what we are given to do, and the One from whom it all comes.

Jesus made time to withdraw from everyone and everything to be alone with God. And to get back in touch with his call, the core purpose of his life. When we make time daily, and more extended periods on occasion, 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 see how faithfulness to and good stewardship of 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 cultivating a life that benefits the world. The world needs what each of us is truly created to be and to do, not what we think others expect or want from us.

The inward journey, the disciplines of silence, prayer, study, sharing with one another and holding one another accountable—these are essential to our lives and work as persons and as mission groups. I am aware that I speak more about the inward journey than the outward journey. I am aware of the needs around us, and I think all of us are. I am also aware that the outward seems to come more easily to us than the inward. We like to be busy, to get things done. What I have learned in my own life, and what this community has learned through the years, is that the inward journey is prior to the outward, that if we are not working faithfully, in a disciplined way, with our inward life, as persons and as mission groups, the outward work loses its direction, its essence, and its focus. It becomes less and less something God is doing through us, and increasingly something we are doing out of our own designs and strength and will power. It won't last, and it will not be an expression of God's love and power and spirit.

We resist the disciplines for our own inward life, and yet that is what makes the real difference in us and in what we do. We learn, IF we work faithfully with the inward journey practices, that they are not at all a burden or legalism. They are what liberates us and brings growth in love and in being channels of what God seeks to do through us.

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. Jesus moved on, according to his call. His life was driven by his sense of what God had particularly given and empowered him to do, NOT by the expectations, even the needs, of others. This means that we, Jesus' community, do not exist in order to meet every need. That sounds strange, doesn't it? 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 own relationship with God. He knew what people most deeply need—to live their lives in different, new ways. This 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 the well of our own spirit and relationship with God. Nothing is more truly healing and empowering than that!

If we are living our lives on the basis of call and our gifts, which is what a commitment to membership in this community is about, this little story in Mark's gospel is of tremendous help. The needs of other people and our world are many and great. However, I think this story and scripture as a whole tell us that the needs of the world are best met by those who are responding to them through a diversity of callings and gifts. We serve others and the world best when we are living out of what we most deeply feel called and gifted to do, responding to a need that is most compelling in our hearts and minds. The spiritual life as we work with it is about giving the time and attention needed to discern in our own lives those callings and those gifts. And that spiritual work is ongoing, through all the changing seasons and circumstances of our lives.

I have been in a new “season of re-discernment” for a few years now. Yes, even at 67 years old, I am continuing to be aware of where I am still living out of others' expectations, or responding to things to which I am not called. I have always observed in my own life how responding to what you think others want you to be or do, or to needs to which you are not called, diminishes your life, your joy, your effectiveness. Most of us are programmed by family, society, and, yes, religion, to do or be what others expect or want from us. The spiritual life, which for us is following Jesus on the inward and outward journeys of prayer

and service, is about knowing and staying in touch with our authentic call, which arises within our authentic, our true self. I do not have the energy I had in previous years. I am working with some health issues that call for greater care of myself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Being in that season of life in which we are more keenly aware that we do not have unlimited days left on this earth, I find a deep longing to be concentrated in those things to which I am most deeply called and for which I am gifted, and not to other things. Fortunately, I am part of a community that understands and encourages these things, and holds them to be of foremost importance. So, I am letting go of a lot these days, and feeling, more than ever, helped and inspired by this brief but powerful story of Jesus escaping the crowds and all of their needs in order to re-center himself in God and in what he most deeply knew himself to be put on earth to do. Then he moved on to do those things that would be of most help to others and the world—his calling and his gifts. For me, it is working with our worship, the music, the sermon, spiritual conversations with those exploring membership in our community, and my mission group. And for those things, the need for solitude, rest, and physical care.

This is part of what we call accountability. When we make a commitment to this community, either to membership or to move toward it, we are recognizing how important it is to have others hold us accountable. By that I mean, we help and support one another in this journey. How are you doing with touching your deepest sense of calling? How are you doing identifying and then embracing the gifts God has given you with which to serve the world? Are you letting go of the things to which you are not called for the sake of your deepest calling? Are you taking time each day for silence, inner listening, self-awareness, and discerning your true self from the false self, your true calling and gifts from others' expectations or demands? These kinds of questions need to be worked with on a regular basis, in our personal inward journey time and in our mission groups. It has to do with living more and more fully, in each season of our life, the life for which we are created and to which we are called and empowered by Jesus.