

SERMON

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – YEAR B

“BALANCING ACT”

MARK 1:29-39 / FEBRUARY 4, 2018

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Does life make you feel as if you are a juggler? You try to juggle a number of things at the same time, and then one more thing is added, then another, Then yet another. You are so busy and take on so many roles: marriage partner, family member, friend, parent, grandparent, sibling, caregiver, worker, volunteer, citizen. And you do not want to ‘drop the ball’ regarding any of these roles and the activities these roles impose on you. But as we all know there are times when this is anything but easy.

Perhaps Jesus felt a bit like that when the whole town of Capernaum brought their sick and troubled individuals to him. At one point, Jesus tried to take a break. He went to a secluded spot to pray. Simon and some others looked for him and upon finding him said to him in exasperation, “Everybody’s looking for you.”

We see here an example of what Jesus frequently discovered – this tension between welcoming the crowds on the one hand and his need for solitude on the other. The need for quiet time and space for oneself is part of the balance that Jesus modeled and which we need. “Whole cities” crowded around him, and at times he welcomed their pressing upon him; at

other times he would retreat to a secluded place. Even though “everyone was looking for him”, he would recognize his own need for peaceful renewal. Jesus needed people and he needed privacy. Faith is both personal and social. Our health is to be found in keeping both in balance. Now we emphasize one; then we take care of the other, attending to both over the course of our lives.

In my own life, I try to live in this way, though I admit that I am far from being good at it. Coming off a week of study leave reminds me how important it is to have quiet time, reflective time, time for pursuits beyond the regular routine, a change of pace. It also reminds me of how important it is, at other times, to be in the company of loved ones. We need the embrace and support of others, as they need it from us. In this day and age isolation of persons is more prevalent. More people are living alone than ever before.

Life is less community oriented and time spent with gadgets and computers and TV screens have displaced much social gathering. In such an environment church can and does play an important role. No longer is it the case that people who first come to church stay because of their common beliefs; rather in these days people who first come to church stay because they find community; they find a safe and welcoming community.

At the same time, there is this need to be alone. We have to have our own personal space and time for that still, small voice of God to communicate with us.

My participation in the community of faith brings me back again and again to my personal, intimate relationship with God. When the needs of Peter and his family had been met; when Jesus had addressed the needs of the crowds and then his own soul, the time came to expand the mission beyond Capernaum.

And here we find the healthy tension that must always be present in the mission of the Christian community. He met the needs of many people in Capernaum. But there are other towns. He reminded the disciples of the need to move out and beyond the immediate horizon. A healthy ministry is one which keeps in balance the needs of the people nearby with the needs of those far away. And so, we look to our immediate surroundings to see how we might serve as a Christian community.

Consequently, we support Oak Table which serves those living nearby who survive on low income; we open our doors on cold nights for the homeless in our area to have a place to sleep. But we also support the needs of people in far off places – sometimes through our givings to the Mission and Service Fund; sometimes by actions we take individually or through the work of our Justice Team or Just Living group, as examples.

Jesus helped a lot of people. But do you suppose he helped every person in Capernaum who sought him, Or, did he move on before some received attention?

On the one hand, we might consider an effective congregation is one which waits to fulfill its mission in national and global ministries until it has met all

the needs of all the people in the congregation or nearby. On the other hand, we might consider an effective congregation is one that is committed to the enormous and pressing needs of the world, then as a result, having the courage, zeal, and momentum also to meet the needs of the people nearby. If you and I wait until we have completely fulfilled the needs of everyone in our community before we “go into all the world” we will never get there. Much less will we meet the needs of people in our community if we wait until we have served all the needs of our congregation.

Author Rick Morley, in his study of this passage from Mark, is struck by Jesus’ reaction to the disciples telling him that everyone is looking for him; that there’s still a long line of people waiting to be healed and comforted. And what does Jesus do? He picks up and moves on to another place. Morley writes, “Wow, as many times as I’ve read this passage, that never ceases to amaze me. He moves on. And he moves on after taking the time to get up so early in the morning that it’s still dark, so that he might find a deserted place to pray.”

Morely continues, “There’s a part of me which finds this so very foreign it’s disorienting. I mean, there was work to do. Hurting people. Sick people. Possessed people. People who were lost, and weary, and sinking into the depths of despair. Couldn’t he have foregone the early morning prayer session and opened the office a little early that day? Couldn’t he have stuck around a little while longer, and alleviated some more of the hurt in that place? Did he have to go so quickly?”

Morley sees two things going on here. “First, as vitally important to the salvation of the world that Jesus’ earthly ministry was, it was not so important that Jesus didn’t have time to take care of himself, and his spiritual connection with God. And, if Jesus can find the time to care for his spiritual nurture, how much more should we find the time. Second, Jesus demonstrates that you don’t have to do it all. You can’t save everyone. Sometimes you have to move on. Sometimes you just have to pick up and go where the spirit sends you, even if it means people are still going to be in need. Because, honestly, there are always going to be people in need.”

Another writer puts it this way, “...[F]irst, no one of us can do everything. Sometimes we have to stop and say no. Even though there are so many worthy endeavours, what good are we if we burn out? Or worse, what good are we if we work at what we will never be good doing. This is no excuse to do nothing. The question is: To what unique task is God calling us? The second lesson is that we will not find our distinctive way if we do not find time for prayer. This not only requires taking time apart, but calls for patience. Buddha said, ‘the greatest prayer is patience.’ Sitting and waiting is often the best prayer.... prayer is essentially listening, not talking. We may need that time for an hour or two in the heat of the day. Or we may need days or months as a recluse. Are we patient enough to listen and wait in silence? Peter and the rest of the gang were not patient at all while they were frantically hunting for Jesus.”

This writer concludes, “Let us stop and find our way in prayer, no matter how long it takes. Then at some point we will hear Jesus say, as he did in today’s Gospel, ‘Let’s go.’”

Among the people in need that Jesus did help while he was in Capernaum were those considered demon-possessed. Of course, Jesus lived in a time when certain ailments, certain psychological or psychiatric conditions, or peculiar behaviour or evil deeds were explained away by the presence of demons. Put into a 21st century understanding we might ask what are the demons of our world? Is one of the demons alcoholism or drug addiction. Or could another be a tormenting mental illness of one form or another? What about racism or sexism or sexual abuse, misconduct and harassment? Those things that not only churn our stomachs but rob us of joy, peace of mind or safety, impact negatively our ability to have healthy relationships?

In the midst of that demon-infested world, Jesus began his ministry of healing and touching, lifting up and uplifting human beings, extracting, one by one, the demons from the lives of those he encountered.

Perhaps one of those demons is living an unbalanced life that either does not look after one's individual and spiritual needs or does not look after the needs of our neighbours near and far. Author Madeleine l'Engle remembers a night years ago when one of her small children was scared and unsettled. It was evening, and the family was spending time together at the close of the day. One of l'Engle's children was disturbed that night by the death of a grandmother. And on top of that, a storm was raging outside her window. So, in her bedtime prayer, the little girl was direct in her petition: "Dear God, please be God. Amen."

And maybe as we consider the balancing act of living a healthy lifestyle and of keeping the demons at bay, we find time and space to pray for God's help to do just that, saying, "Dear God, please be God". Amen.

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