

APart

April 7, 2024

Mark 1:35-39

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He 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.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking.

God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

The first chapter of the Gospel of Mark is action packed. We are introduced to John the Baptist, Jesus gets baptized, is tempted in the wilderness, and calls his first disciples. Then time slows down and the gospel writer focuses in on just one day in the life of Jesus. It begins with Jesus heading to the synagogue, where he dazzles everyone with his amazing teaching. While in the synagogue a man with a belligerent unclean spirit starts yelling at Jesus and Jesus casts it out. From the synagogue he travels to the home of his newly called disciples Simon and Andrew only to discover Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. He heals her and he eats dinner. As the sun starts to set, the **whole** city, according to the gospel writer, crowds around the house bringing with them every sick and possessed person they know in hopes of being healed by Jesus.

We don't know exactly how his day ends. Was Jesus able to heal everyone that came to him that evening so he could rest easy or were there more? The next day we learn that everyone is searching for him, which makes me think he didn't get to everyone the night before. Imagine Jesus, confronted by overwhelming need and brokenness, stopping for the night.

It is a scene no compassionate person wants to imagine or encounter. Turning your back and shutting the door on someone in need defies our conviction to help. It makes us heartsick. And yet, even Jesus, had to rest. Even Jesus had limits.

Whether he did or didn't heal everyone in that one busy day in the life of Jesus, we do know that the next day, there are more broken bodies, more tormented spirits, more desperate cries. **Everyone** is searching for him.

But Jesus is gone. The disciples hunt for him and are frantic when they finally find him in a deserted place, by himself. The gospel writer tells us that Jesus hiked to that deserted place before the sun came up and he went to this deserted place to pray.

Given the day he just had I'd love to hear that prayer. Did he pray for all the hurting people? Did he pray for strength? Did he pray for an easier day and time to relax? Did he question his ability to sustain this kind of ministry? Did he pray for guidance?

We don't know what he prayed but we do know he made time to pray. He made the time to step out of the chaos and urgent needs around him to pause, reflect, and regroup. And when those disciples found him, breathless and frantic, Jesus responds with laser-like focus on his purpose. He says, *'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.'*

It a moment when it would have been so easy to get sidetracked into riding this wave of popularity, healing folks, running to meet one need and then the next, Jesus regains his focus in a deserted place, where the only voice he hears is God's. It is in this time apart that Jesus finds the resolve to stay true to his purpose, which no doubt disappointed the folks in Capernaum, and likely confused his disciples. I can hear them asking Jesus, "But what about???"

When everything seems urgent, and the needs around us are overwhelming, it is easy to get swept up a whirlwind of activity and expectations that then drive our decisions and erode our boundaries. We start saying "yes" to everything out of fear of disappointing and frustrating those we love and want to serve. And if we allow this to go on too long, we can burn out and grow resentful. Time apart, to reflect and to reconnect with God's call upon our lives, grounds us, so we don't get swept up in a flurry of busyness.

As I prepared for my sabbatical, I wasn't sure what it would be for me. Unlike Jesus, who had to sneak away before sunrise, you gifted me with three months and released me from all expectations. It was my time apart; my time to reflect and pray without the usual responsibilities that busy my days. It was time for me to remember who I am, as a daughter, a wife, a sister, a parent, a friend, and as your pastor.

In the past three months:

- I made three trips to Iowa assisting in helping my mom and her husband move.
- I traveled to Oklahoma to visit my brother and a dear friend.
- I traveled to Texas to help after my mother-in-law fell and broke her shoulder, requiring surgery.

- I took a short train trip, and two back-to-back cruises with my husband, and one last minute cruise by myself.
- I read books and never got around to most of the projects I had planned for my condo.
- I went to church on Sundays.
- I did some yoga and walked for miles. I drank gallons of coffee.

During this time apart, I came to appreciate a great deal. I won't burden you with everything I learned, but I do want to share a few highlights.

- I came to appreciate just how much time you can waste on your phone
- I came to appreciate the grief associated with aging. From the death and decline of friends and loved ones, to leaving your home, dealing with health issues, and not being able to do what you once could with ease – aging requires resilience.
- I came to appreciate the energy required for caregiving and the constant vigilance it requires.
- After worshipping in person with eleven different congregations, I came to appreciate just how uncomfortable it is to pass the peace in a church where you know no one – especially when you are just standing there as everyone around you strikes up friendly conversations with people they already know.
- I came to appreciate that there is no one right way to do church or worship.
- After reading several books and articles, I came to appreciate just how much the world has changed in the last thirty plus years and that I am not solely responsible for why people no longer attend church like they once did.
- I gained clarity around my strengths and passion, and I came to the conclusion that I enjoy preaching the lectionary and wrestling with passages of scripture I might not otherwise choose for worship.
- I came to appreciate how serious I can be and that I might need to lighten up.
- I came to appreciate how easily I get swept up in the busy-ness of ministry wanting to please everyone.

There's more, but I will spare you. Because I began my sabbatical in Iowa, I started to pay attention to Caitlin Clark and basketball in general, watching a few games with my step-dad and mom. I had a long conversation with my husband about traveling. I asked him if anyone ever gets called for traveling anymore. He laughed because he just watched a TikToc showing players taking four, five, six, or more steps with the ball in their hands, and not getting called for traveling.

When I played basketball in high school, traveling was an egregious offense. If your pivoting foot moved a fraction of an inch, you were called for traveling. All this came back to me after reading a book by Gil Rendle on the leadership needed for leading

congregations at this time in history. We need to have one foot planted on our purpose and we need to be agile and able to pivot how we go about serving that purpose.

Just like girl's basketball in Iowa had to pivot. Clear up to 1993, most high school girls in Iowa played six-on-six basketball and the state basketball tournament was almost as huge as the state fair. Entire towns came to Des Moines to cheer their girls on. In six-on-six basketball, you play on a split court, three forwards shoot, three guards on the other end defend the basket. You were not allowed to cross the center line. And get this, you only got two-dribbles to advance the ball. The passage of Title IX, which was a good thing, challenged this beloved Iowa institution and it quickly became apparent that girls coming out of the six-on-six game were not competitive for college teams and scholarships. It took years to phase it out completely, with some small towns holding out, having their own six-on-six state tournament. Just think, if the Iowa Girls Athletic Association refused to pivot, we very likely wouldn't have Caitlin Clark. Go Hawkeyes!

It may seem like a silly analogy, or a shameless way to plug the Hawkeyes as they play for the championship today, but for me it works. It is an important learning as I consider the kind of leader I need to be in the time I have left as your senior pastor. One of my responsibilities is to help clarify our purpose as we face the challenges of declining membership and trust in institutional church. We will continue to pivot, perhaps making difficult choices, yet we will, if we keep our focus, have good news to proclaim. The challenges we are facing are not problems with answers, they are birth pangs of God making us new; something we have yet to imagine.

The church as an institution is changing. Yet our purpose remains. We have a countercultural message – a message of generosity, of compassion, of service...a message of hope, and healing, and community...a message that promotes love and concern for our neighbor. We have good news to proclaim and to live. How we live into this purpose will continue to change and evolve...we will have to pivot, without traveling.

May we do so with a spirit of hopefulness and adventure.