

Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
4 February 2018

Mark 1:29-39

I have observed an increase in stress lately. Not just in me, but an increase in stress among some of you and among many people I know. I often wonder about the reasons for our stress and for many of us work is the culprit. The other day I read, "9 ways to get an ulcer". It reads like this: "1. Your job comes first, second and third. Forget everything else. 2. Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays are fine times to be at the office, since there is no one else to bother you. 3. Always have your briefcase with you, as this provides an opportunity to review all the worries of the day. 4. Never say "no" to a request. 5. Accept all invitations to meetings, banquets, and committees. 6. All forms of recreation are a waste of time. 7. Never delegate responsibility; carry the entire load yourself. 8. If your work calls for traveling, work all day and travel at night to keep that morning appointment. And, finally, 9. No matter how many jobs you have, you can always do more." These are mental attitudes that lead to ulcers, according to the author.

At first glance, Jesus of Nazareth seems to be following these rules, at least according to the Gospel of Mark. He is on the move, he is always working, he is extremely busy. Last week we saw him teaching and ministering in Capernaum: calling his disciples, teaching with authority in the Synagogue, and healing a man of an evil spirit. Today the story continues, and he is just as busy as he was when we left the story last week. He leaves the synagogue and immediately enters the "house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John." There he finds that "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever" and he decides to heal her at once. We then hear that "they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door." He has hardly had enough time to visit when he is surrounded by the needy of the city. Can you imagine? The whole city was there: some looking for healing, some seeking release from their spiritual afflictions, and some just looking to see what he would do next. I can just picture how much the need of his people moved him to compassion. How could he not cure them all? How could he not work an extra hour, do an extra miracle, forgive one more sin, liberate one more soul? The Scripture in fact tells us that "he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons."

From a human stand point Jesus' ministry started with a bang! There are so many numbers, so many adoring fans, so many new converts or disciples or, at least, interested people. By today's standards of church planting Jesus is well on his way to mega church status. He is preaching a message of salvation, he is curing the sick, and he is performing many works of power, including exorcisms. His ministry is going well. And of course, it is easy to believe that this is the result of his high work ethic. After all, he is tireless, he

has boundless energy, and obviously he knows he must seize the day and continue to build momentum. This is what his disciples expect. They know the people need him and they expect Jesus to be there for them.

And yet, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” While it was still dark Jesus steals a brief moment to be alone with his Father. The disciples don’t quite understand and don’t quite approve. Listen to what happens next, “Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’” Even though it was very early in the morning people were already looking for him. In fact, his disciples were “hunting” for him. There is a hint of criticism in Simon’s voice when he said “Everyone is searching for you.” And there is a hint of irony in the narrative as well. Jesus who is the giver of freedom and liberation is himself being "hunted", being pursued, being chased. I am sure the disciples wondered why Jesus was on this mountain alone, doing absolutely nothing, gazing at the stars, when there was so much need down below.

These frantic demands and unrealistic expectations of the people accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. Over and over again, we see the same pattern: Jesus goes to a silent place where he can be alone with his Father, often under the cover of night. Eventually he is found and he returns to the mission field because he feels compassion for the crowds. It is very easy to see Jesus as a workaholic social worker, always on-call and always on the go. But, Jesus was much more than a highly efficient social worker. Just think about this for a moment. Even though the disciples find him and rebuke him, Jesus does not go back to the “Everybody” who were looking for him; he does not go to the masses below to continue healing and "doing." He in fact 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.” In other words, “I came to proclaim the Gospel, that is my main mission. The healing and exorcisms are important, but I came to do much more!” Jesus resists the temptation to be pigeon-holed into a doer role, because as much as the people were afflicted by physical needs and ailments, their truest need was spiritual. They were in need of the Gospel and for this reason Jesus needed to remain on the move.

There is a lesson here for the Church of today. The Christian Church often worries too much about numbers and marketing. We worry too much about the “doing” part of our mission and we often forget that our primary job is to preach the Gospel. We are here to offer freedom to the captives, to lead people to a deeper relationship with God in his son, Jesus Christ. The marketing part, and the social ministry part, for that matter, are just small aspects of our mission, but they are not the whole mission. We can not sacrifice the Gospel at the altar of our social service, anymore than we can preach the Gospel to empty stomachs. We must do both at the same time, but we must not forget that preaching the Gospel is primary to all we do. This applies both to our church and to

us individually. And, the best way to preach the Gospel I have found is through the creation of relationships with those who haven't developed a saving faith in Jesus.

There is another message for us today. It is very easy to become busy. Life is busy, there is always something to do. Time has become our world's greatest commodity. It is scarce and there is always one more ministry, one more program, one more person to go see, and one more Bible study to teach. In your case, there is one more project at the job, one more report to write, one more sales call to make, and one more commitment to take care of. As the saying goes, "Activity presumes a life filled with purpose." But, my friends, it is so easy to become so busy that we forget what is primary in our lives. Jesus knew this well. For him relationships were primary, the center, the major focus of his life. Chief among those relationships was his relationship with his Father. Taking time to pray and be along with God was fundamental to his life. It was what kept him sane. It recharged his energy, gave him the strength to go on, helped him clarify his mission, and it helped him stay connected to the source of all power. I dare say that Jesus was as effective as he was, precisely because of this relationship with his loving Father.

This is an invitation for us today. We can not sacrifice our relationships at the altar of our careers and our ambitions. We must set aside time for those we love, specially God. This is what we are doing at Grace in our Centering prayer. We gather on the first Wednesday of each month at 9:00am and we quiet our minds and our hearts and enter into God's presence in meditation. It is a time of rest and refreshment. And all of you are invited to join us. But, if you are unable to attend mid-morning prayer group, I still invite you to spend some time in silent prayer every day. Find a place in your home where you will not be distracted, and let God speak to you in silence. This quiets the mind, gives you physical body some rest, and recharges your spiritual batteries. Remember, only God can help us realize what is truly important in our lives and prayer and meditation is one of the best ways to hear the voice of God. I pray that, like Jesus, you will accept the challenge to create the space necessary to commune with God in prayer. He loves you and he seeks to have a relationship with you. I pray you will work on your relationship with him starting this very day. Amen!