

AWAY FROM THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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To Pray: Mark 1:29-39

Busy. That's the answer we sometimes hear from people. How's your family? They're doing great, but life has been so busy lately. How's the new job going? It's going well, but it sure keeps me busy. How's retirement been for you? Wonderful, but busy. I don't know how I ever had time to work before.

Just prior to the passage we just read, we find that Jesus is busy at the synagogue in Capernaum, teaching and driving out an impure spirit. Amazement grips the audience, and they begin to discuss the events. "What sort of new teaching is this?" they exclaim. "He doesn't quote other authorities to make his point; he has his own authority. Even evil spirits obey his orders!" The news about Jesus and what he can do spreads quickly throughout the entire region of Galilee.

Meanwhile Jesus heads next to Peter's house, a short eighty-three foot walk down a narrow alley from the synagogue. James, John, and Andrew are there, along with Peter's mother-in-law, who is in bed with a high fever; a serious condition in those times that could lead to death. Jesus is made aware of the situation, and goes to her bedside. He takes her by the hand, helps her sit up, and the fever is gone.

By this time, word about Jesus' ability has spread even farther. That evening after sunset, all the people in town who need to be healed of sickness or demon possession show up at Peter's house. All of them. Jesus is healing people left and right. And if that weren't enough, the entire town of Capernaum has gathered at the door to watch! Some scholars estimate that 1,500 people lived in Capernaum at that time. Can you imagine what a scene this must have been with that mass of people crammed outside Peter's house?

From teaching and driving out the demon in the synagogue, to healing Peter's mother-in-law, to freeing the townspeople of all their illnesses, to driving out their demons...the ministry is only a few days old, yet it already seems to be getting out of hand. Jesus feels called to preach the good news, yet the people are crowding around him and pushing him to celebrity status. For Jesus, it must be exhausting.

It can be exhausting for us, too, when our lives are too busy. Exhausting physically (we'll get to that later in the service), but also exhausting spiritually when the events of our life, no matter how good or even church-related they may be, begin to crowd out the spiritual practices that keep us close to God.

Jesus knows this and gets up very early the next morning, while it is still dark, and leaves Peter's house alone. He heads to a deserted place, a place of solitude and seclusion, a place that is remote and removed from the hustle and bustle of life, and he does what he often does in his ministry, he prays (Luke 5:16).

The Greek word used here for praying, *proseuchomai*, is a fairly common word in the New Testament, but one that carries deep meaning when you dig into the original language. Verbs like this one mean that although the subject of the verb is doing an action, the subject is also receiving something from the action. It's all implied in that one Greek word. So when people pray, they are not just talking to God, they are also receiving something in response from him. And in this situation what Jesus is likely receiving is intimacy with the Father, renewal by the Holy Spirit, and wisdom and insight for these early days of his ministry.

When the disciples find him in his secluded place, "Hey, Jesus, what are you doing out here? Everyone's looking for you", Jesus knows it's time to move on. He is not cultivating popularity. He is fleeing it. In the clarity and power of that early morning prayer session, Jesus and his disciples set out for the first time in ministry.

In the busyness of our lives, we, too, need times of renewal and restoration, times of intimacy with the Father, times spent in prayer.

To Mourn: Matthew 14:3-13a

Every gospel writer begins the narrative of Jesus' ministry with the same story, the story of John the Baptist. Most of them do so by reciting words from the prophets: "I will send a messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way for Jesus." That's what Malachi proclaims about John (Malachi 3:1). "He will be a voice of one

calling in the wilderness,” Isaiah adds (40:3). And it’s not just the gospels that begin with John the Baptist as they tell the story of Jesus’ ministry. Peter and Paul do the same thing several times in the book of Acts.

The life of Jesus and the life of John the Baptist are certainly intertwined. The two are related on their mothers’ side of the families, and their birth narratives are told side-by-side in the Gospel of Luke. Later on, John is the one who baptizes Jesus despite John’s protest that he should be baptized by Jesus, and when John sees Jesus coming towards him at Bethany, he says of Jesus, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Probably most revealing, though, about their relationship is what Jesus himself has to say about John the Baptist. In the book of John, Jesus calls him a lamp that burns and gives light (5:35), and in Matthew’s gospel, we hear Jesus say, “I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). High words of praise from the Savior, to be sure.

High words of praise, however, are not what we hear from Herod, the tetrarch (governor) of Galilee. John the Baptist, who was never one to mince words, publicly criticizes Herod for his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and as Luke says in his book, he also calls him out for “all the other evil things he had done” (Luke 3:19). Herod is outraged and locks John up in prison, but he doesn’t kill him because he fears the people who think that John is a prophet.

John’s protection comes to an end, however, as we read tonight. Herodias’ daughter, at the prompting of her mother, asks for John to be beheaded, and because Herod has promised her anything she wants, he has to comply with the request.

John’s followers take his body, bury it, and then go inform Jesus of the tragic news. When Jesus hears what happens, he heads to a deserted place, a place of solitude and seclusion, a place that is remote and removed from the hustle and bustle of life, a place where he can be alone to mourn and to grieve the death of his friend, his family member, his fellow worker in the kingdom.

Grieving the death of a loved one, as most of us know, is not easy, but it’s also a highly individual experience. Different people grieve in different ways. This can depend on their personality and coping style, their life experience, their faith, and how significant the deceased was to them.

For most people, the support from others is needed at some point in the grieving process. They need people who will listen, people who will answer questions, people who will just be present. Some individuals, for example, who experienced the death of a loved one during Covid still feel the effects of a lack of connection with others during that time caused by no visitation time and no complete funeral service. The lack of physical compassion made the grieving process so much harder.

And yet Jesus’ example in this passage suggests that there is also a need to spend some time grieving alone away from the busyness of everyday life to reflect, to remember, and to let God minister to our hearts and minds by his Spirit.

To Rest: Mark 6:7-13, 30-32

After Jesus experiences a less-than-warm welcome in his hometown of Nazareth, he begins to travel from village to village to teach the good news of the kingdom. And as he does, he decides that the work is not for him alone to do. Since the beginning of chapter 3 in Mark, Jesus has been actively, even aggressively, discipling his disciples during ministry experiences.

They have seen Jesus in conflict with religious leaders and with his own family. They have watched him heal people. They have heard him preach the Word. They have even witnessed his power over demons, but now the time has come for the Twelve to be sent out.

“All right, guys, gather around,” Jesus says. “It’s time for you to join in this mission. You’re going to head out in pairs, two-by-two so that your testimony will be established by the mouths of two witnesses.” The disciples appear anxious. “Don’t worry,” Jesus says, “I will give you the authority and power to do the work that is before you.”

He tells them to take nothing for their journey except a walking stick, no food, no traveler’s bag, no money. He allows them to wear sandals but not to take a change of clothes. Instead, they are to rely on traditional Jewish hospitality to provide for their needs. “Wherever you go,” Jesus says, “stay in the same house until you leave town, but if you’re not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don’t make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.”

So the disciples head out on their mission. Sometime later they return to Jesus, gather around him and begin telling him all the exciting news. You can almost hear Peter go first: “Jesus, we were preaching the good news of the kingdom all over the place, and people were receptive. They really wanted to know how their lives could be different.” James chimes in, “And those demons, well, we sent them packing left and right; it was amazing!” “Don’t forget about the healings,” Andrew adds. We tried to keep a tally, but there were so many, we lost count. We prayed and anointed them with oils, and they were cured of their sickness!”

Jesus is mightily pleased with the work the disciples have accomplished, but a concern also begins to weigh upon his heart. He looks at the twelve disciples, and he can see how busy they have been, busy doing the Lord’s work, but he can also see the weariness that is beginning to set in. They have been so busy that they didn’t even have the opportunity to sit down for something to eat. “Come,” Jesus says, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest for a while, a place of solitude and seclusion, a place that is remote and removed from the hustle and bustle of life.

God calls not just the disciples but all of us to rest. He set the example when he created the world and then gives us the instructions in the Ten Commandments: Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.

Knowing what we should be doing is one thing; putting it into practice, however, is quite another. Finding rest in our fast-paced society is hard, but we also need to remember that God did not create our bodies to work non-stop. We need times of sleep and nourishment, times to let our bodies be refreshed and renewed.

And while physical rest is important in our lives, even more important is spiritual rest, rest that comes by trusting in Christ as Savior. For when we put our hope in him away from the hustle and bustle of the ways of this world our spiritual practices become transformational.

Then we can pray with assurance, knowing that Christ hears our prayers and pleads our case before the Father. Then we can mourn with the comfort that Christ has defeated the enemy, death itself. Then we can rest in a Savior who alone can satisfy our every need. Come, dear friends, come away to places of solitude and seclusion. Come and spend time with the Savior. Amen.