

Sermon for February 5, 2012

Mark 1:29-39

Seeking Renewal

The Reverend Roger Pancost

Deborah Krause, who is professor of New Testament at Eden Theological Seminary, finds bitter irony in the story of Simon's mother-in-law. You will recall that when Jesus enters the home of Simon and Andrew he is told that Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. Jesus goes to the woman, takes her by the hand and lifts her up. Instantly, the fever leaves her body and she begins to serve them. Krause writes, "Healed just in time for supper, indeed!" Every time that Dr. Krause has read this passage with a group of women, she has heard this same response. Even in light of first-century social customs, it seems ironic that the first thing this woman is expected to do after she is healed is serve others.

When I read this story I am reminded of a time from my childhood in which a large number of family members were planning to get together for Thanksgiving dinner. In the days before Thanksgiving my mother became very ill with flu-like symptoms. Because my mother was the one who took the greatest responsibility for preparing the food, there was concern that the dinner would not happen. On the day of Thanksgiving, my mother arose from sick-bed and began the task of cooking. I can assure you that my mother did not do so with great joy.

The story of Simon's mother-in-law is a story that many people, both women and men, can relate to because life is filled with many responsibilities. Some of us work for pay; others are raising children, taking care of other family members, or are engaged in volunteer work. In addition to these activities, we work to take care of our homes and our yards. At times, it seems that there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish all of these tasks. At various times in our lives we can feel overwhelmed by our responsibilities and the work that is before. And that is why I love the second half of our reading from Mark.

Jesus is no stranger to work or responsibilities. Since arriving in Capernaum Jesus has been engaged in teaching and healing with dozens of people. For the past few days, an endless line of individuals have come to Jesus expecting him to meet their needs. In the midst of all of these activities, Mark states that Jesus gets up really early in the morning and goes to a deserted place and prays. Jesus steps away from the hectic pace of his life and finds time for the renewal of his mind, body, and soul.

This story gives each one of us permission to do the same. Even though it may feel like we can't take the time for renewal, the reality is that if we don't take the time, we run the risk of burning out or breaking down.

Last year I had the privilege of taking three months of sabbatical leave from my pastoral duties. While pastoral sabbaticals usually include times of learning, they are also designated as times of rest and renewal. During those three months I had the opportunity to rest my body, and renew my spirit. This time of sabbatical leave gave me renewed energy for the work of my ministry.

I am well-aware that most people do not receive three months of sabbatical leave at any time in life. One of the things I like about the story from Mark is that it reveals that times of rest and renewal can be found each day. We may not have a three-month sabbatical, or even a week-long vacation, but we can find a few moments in our day to seek renewal. Jesus demonstrates that such times are important for our own health and well-being. They are also crucial for the work that we do. It is difficult to be there for other people if we are overcome with exhaustion and anxiety.

Chris Bell, who is the director of the Interactive Learning-Leadership Connection, understands this point. He teaches that in order to be a good leader, an individual needs to know how to rest. Bell believes that there are four components in each of our lives that we must honor. These components are: the physical, the mental, the social/emotional and the spiritual. I see all four of these components modeled in the life and teachings of Jesus. (leadershipconnection.net)

In speaking about caring for our physical self, Chris Bell points out that the food we put into our bodies is the fuel that helps us accomplish everything that we do. He writes, "If you put low grade fuel in a car, you get knocks and misfiring. If you put low grade fuel in yourself, don't expect anything better."

Throughout the gospels we read of Jesus taking the time to eat. I am certain that his Mediterranean diet consisted of foods that are good fuel.

Jesus also got plenty of physical exercise as he walked from town to town. When we take the time to engage in physical exercise we increase our stamina and lower our stress level. In the 21st century we now understand that physical activity releases endorphins into the bloodstream that can even help to fight depression.

The second component Chris Bell writes about is mental. He encourages people to stretch their minds through reading. He states, "Reading builds your own knowledge and boosts your creative abilities." It is clear to me that Jesus would not

have been able to teach in the synagogues if he did not take the time to study the Hebrew Scriptures. We can help keep our minds sharp through reading and through other creative pursuits.

The third component is social/emotional. Chris Bell describes this component, saying, “Socializing helps us nurture the intrinsic needs within all of us to belong and to love and be loved. To fill those needs within you, surround yourself with people who are pleasant to be around and who nurture you.”

Not only do the scriptures reveal that Jesus sat down for meals, they teach us that Jesus shared these meals with other people. We are also told that the first thing that Jesus did when he began his three-year ministry, was invite other people to become a part of his community.

While we may find ourselves constantly surrounded by people, it is important to take the time to be with people who nurture us.

The fourth component is the one expressed in this morning’s reading, “spiritual.” This story tells us that Jesus went to a deserted place in order to pray. This is one of three places in Mark that speak of Jesus going off to pray alone. Jesus demonstrates that taking the time for prayer, empowers him to continue his ministry with others.

Each one of us can find a moment or two each day to connect ourselves spiritually. Like Jesus, we can enter into a time of silence to be in communion with God. We can also connect spiritually by attending worship with others. Through such spiritual connections we are empowered to continue our ministries of love.

As the parent of a very active 14-month-old child, I know how difficult it can be to find time to pursue these four components. But I also know from personal experience that when I let one of these components of my life slide, I feel out of balance. I also find myself feeling irritable and less able to be fully present to those around me.

I know that I haven’t shared anything in this sermon that you don’t already know. It is my hope that it will serve as a reminder that each one of us is responsible for our own well-being.

I also hope that after serving her guests, Simon’s mother in law was able to take a nap.

