

Where to Next?

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Mark 1:21-39

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Mark 1:21-39

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. ³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸He 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.”³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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Facebook. Those of you who know it and use it understand its potential.

On Thursday at 9:31 pm, one of my friends posted: “REALLY MAD!!! JUST WALKED INTO THE WALL AND SCRATCHED MY FACE!! It hurts soo bad!!!”

Okay, so those who know Facebook know that you can find some pretty trivial – and often downright weird – things on there. My friend walked into the wall and scratched her face and found it necessary to let us all know about it. Not life-changing news, is it? I kind of wonder how she walked into a wall, but whatever ... it hurt. She got a boo boo. Not earth shaking news.

Friday, 6:20 pm. The same friend posted this: “FOUND MY BROTHER!!! GOD is so amazing! I talked to him today and GOD willing will be reunited with him tomorrow!”

By 7:14 pm on Friday, she gave us a little background: “It’s been 5 long years and considering the fact that he’s been homeless I know that there will [be] challenges. It’s overwhelming!”

Saturday, 3:35 pm. “Well, picked up my brother and he is back home with us and safe!! So thankful!”

Within 20 hours, my friend went from “I have a scratch on my face” to “I found my brother who has been lost for 5 years.” Wow. I was amazed at God’s grace and the complex nature of our lives when one moment we cry over a scratch and the next we welcome back from the dead our brother who was lost.

Is this not the Jesus story in a nutshell?

Jesus and his friends are making their way around the countryside doing what God called them to do, living the subsistence life of itinerant teachers in a poverty stricken, oppressed country where only the rich survive.

Their typical week included Sabbath in the synagogue – much like Sunday morning in church for you and I – so that’s where Mark places Jesus during this visit to Capernaum. A typical day in the life of this roving band of teacher and students. But it turns into a life-changing encounter as quickly as it had begun as a simple day in the synagogue. Like my friend’s Facebook exchange – like life in general – one moment your face hurts because of a scratch; the next moment you’ve found your missing, homeless brother. One minute, Jesus is following his Sabbath ritual, the next he’s bringing a man back to life.

A “man with an unclean spirit” yells out to Jesus: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Jesus brings healing into the man’s life – “Be silent, and come out of him!” – and the man is changed forever, and the synagogue community is changed forever.

Where to next?

Next, they head to Simon and Andrew’s house where they find Simon’s mother-in-law is sick and in bed with a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand and sits her up – the fever leaves her. Once again, from the mundane to the life-changing. Isn’t that the cycle of most of our lives?

The crowds flock to Jesus. They give up their fishing and farming for the day; they get up from their sick beds and limp to the door of the house where Jesus is staying; they walk away from their daily chores of washing and cooking and they search for that moment that just might change their lives forever. And there in the presence of the teacher who taught with a sense of authority that they had never experienced before, they were healed.

The whole city was gathered around the door, and he diagnosed and cured many who were sick with various diseases. "O Jesus, my eye hurts, my back, my head is spinning." And they came one

after another like that. Dozens of people plagued with emotional, psychological, and physical problems coming and dumping their troubles on Jesus. And Jesus deals one on one with the root cause of all the unhealthiness in the whole city. Jesus was burnt out.

From the simple to the extreme in just a few hours. Life. Where to next?

Jesus has to push away. He searches for “a deserted place,” Mark’s author tells us. Have you ever tried to find a deserted place, a space for solitude, somewhere where the “clouds are far behind you,” where the silence wraps around your soul and you can finally rest in the presence of only God? I know that I search but I don’t know that I have ever found that moment in my constantly in-motion life.

One of my favorite places to find solitude is on the Skyline Drive atop the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. I’m not sure why but for me that is a place to let out a deep sigh and breathe in God’s healing touch. I haven’t been for a few years now, but it’s a place that calls to me whenever life crowds around my door clambering for attention and healing. I’ll go with an arm full of books, spread them out on one of the two beds in the room, thinking I’ll finally be able to reduce the pile of “next on the list” books piled on my nightstand at home. Inevitably, I get to read maybe one of them while I’m there. I walk the trails, I eat pancakes, I breath in and out the morning dew and gaze out over the fog lifting from the Shenandoah Valley.

Do you have a place? A room in your house, a garden in the backyard, a chair on the back porch, a road you drive down which quiets your soul?

One preacher writing about her deserted place wrote about her typical morning – up at 5 am (yikes!), a cup of coffee to get her eyes open, out the door for her morning run:

After returning home from the run – usually in the cold, I love to run in the cold – I sit at the same [kitchen] table where I came to life and it is there that I begin with my morning prayer time. In the winter it is still very dark and I'm alone. And though my family is still asleep and unaware that they too have been blessed with the precious gift of life for another day, it is not a deserted place by any stretch of the imagination. There's the sound of the clock ticking reminding me that time is of the essence, and the hum of the refrigerator, a sign of the abundance that God has given me.

The definition of deserted means to be empty, abandoned or forsaken. I cannot say that about any room in my house. Come to think of it, as I look back over my life and think things over, I cannot think of any place that was abandoned or forsaken. I once spent an entire week alone in the woods of northern Michigan working on a manuscript. I knew I was not alone there. I learned too late that deer hunting season had just opened. There were no 5:00 a.m. runs for me that week. I heard signs of both life and impending death of some other of God's creation.

You've heard the riddle – If a tree falls in the woods and there's no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? Now the answer does not trouble me, the question does, because it presupposes that there is no life in the woods. What made that tree fall? Termites? They heard it fall. Is human life the only life that is valued? [Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey]

There really is no “deserted place” anywhere. So I suppose what Jesus did was make a place for himself within himself. A moment where you can't hear the clock tick or

refrigerator hum, the termites chomping or the tree falling. It is where he had to go next in his life if he wanted to be able to move forward to whatever is next.

And that's what I find compelling about this interaction that Mark wants us to know about. It points us to whatever is next.

I was sitting at a table at last evening's Pulled Pork BBQ dinner here at church. Someone said, “I don't remember them doing this last year.” And we all chimed in.

“Well, there was the Chili Cook-off.”

“Was that last year or the year before?”

“We had a spaghetti dinner too, remember?”

“Yeah, but I don't remember when that was.”

“Well, I know they had pulled pork BBQ before.”

“I remember the pictures. But I just don't remember when it was.”

“Last year or the year before.”

“How many desserts can we have?!”

A typical conversation at a church dinner, right? But it made me realize once again something that I've thought about before. Sometimes we move so quickly to the next “moment” in our lives that we don't take time to savor and celebrate the moment that just happened. In church we move from Advent to Christmas, Christmas to Lent, Easter to Pentecost, through each year in a repeating cycle of seasons when we put away one set of colors and pull out another, put away one set of songs and open up another, finish readings of one season and move on to the next.

Where to next?

So it was with the Jesus group too. To the synagogue, scripture is read and the lesson taught, a demon is cast out. To Simon and Andrew's house, a woman is healed, the meal is prepared. To the

cast of villagers crowding around the door, lives are transformed. To bed, awake the next morning. To a deserted place where Jesus can pretend to be alone, his soul is calmed.

“Everyone is searching for you,” the disciples tell Jesus when they find him. There’s more healing to be performed, more lessons to be preached, more people who want or need help moving their lives from the mundane to a life-changing moment. But Jesus moves on to whatever is next. “Let us go on to …” I almost want to read “... to those who need us the most. Let us go back to the house where the crowd is gathering and I can offer change.” But that’s not what happens. “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.” No looking back to celebrate yesterday, to bask in the accolades and reputation of fame that began to surround him. Move on from the Pulled Pork dinner to whatever is next. Shrove Tuesday pancakes? Holy Thursday around tables? Strawberry Festival? The flames and voices of Pentecost? Whatever is next – there we must go because that is what we are here to do.

Where to next? Jesus pushes forward and looks toward the rest of the Galilee where he can preach and teach and heal, where he can remind people like us that there are moments of mundane living followed by life-changing healing for any of us. But let’s not get stuck in those moments whatever they are.

I decided to search online for this verse about Jesus moving on to whatever is next – to the towns and villages down the dusty roads throughout the Galilee. I typed into the Google search engine: “Mark 1:38.” Interspersed with different translations of this particular verse I found references to the “Mark 1” .38 caliber revolver developed by the Royal Small Arms Factory in Enfield, England in 1926-1927.

How ironic. Do you know what’s next for me today? I’m headed to a 3:30 prayer vigil at the site of a murder in Northeast Philadelphia. Last Friday, January 20, Xiang Huang, the owner of

a Chinese restaurant was killed during a robbery of his business, killed by someone misusing a handgun to bring about a violent life-changing moment in the life of one Philadelphia family. The vigil, to which you all are invited, is at Longshore & Tulip Streets in Tacony, a block from the church where I grew up, 2 blocks from my mother’s family home for several generations before her. This is home. This is our home – yours and mine. And it is being snatched away by violence which can be stopped.

Mark 1:38, a telling of the power of healing and the need to move on to what is next. Mark 1, .38 caliber weapon reminding me of what’s next for my life this day – a healing word spoken into a community fractured by the sound of a handgun shattering the potentially quiet night of solitude for someone in that neighborhood.

“Enough!” ends the flyer announcing today’s vigil. “Enough!” Inevitably, this time of the year for me and I think for the church, we are thinking about what’s forward from here. A lot has happened this past year – more new members, special events, fun and laughter, trauma and tears.

Where to next? The newest answer to this question has come in the form of a new Sunday School program which now has a professional staff person in our childcare room, a class for young children and a class for older children – a big move forward toward what’s next for Hope church. And I love watching it happen – as many as 30 children each Sunday ready to learn and grow.

These past few weeks I’ve been gathering people together to create our newest ministry groups – a Justice & Advocacy Committee which is ready for what’s next as it plans to educate us and move us from our seats toward social justice and action. A Communications & Publicity Committee ready to increase ways for getting out news about who we are and what’s happening in this place. A Tech Team meeting today to begin looking at what technology moves us to the next step forward – computers,

projections, sound systems, websites. Next week, our Program & Nurture Committee which has already been functioning last year planning for ways to feed each other's spirits in events and community outreach. Each of these needs your time and energy and commitment. Added to our existing program areas – Outreach, Worship, Christian Education – and Administrative ministries – Church Council, Trustees, Finance, Stewardship, Staff-Parish Relations – these all need our presence so together we can move to whatever is next in the life of this place called Hope.

And one of my goals – our goals – for this year is to do some intentional Church Growth planning with an ad hoc team prepared to think and look outside the box so we can figure out how we move toward what's next here in this community of faith.

We can move from the mundane-ness of our typical lives to the miraculous place of healing and wholeness that is Jesus. Where to next? That's where.

Volunteer to teach. Volunteer to greet. Volunteer to usher. Volunteer to do what God has called us here to do. We can enjoy the celebration for a moment or two – we can find that place of solitude for a few breaths that rejuvenate our meaning – but then let's go to the neighboring towns and villages like Jesus does so that we can proclaim the message that hope is alive and God is present in each of our lives.

Where to next? Let's figure it out together.

Amen.