

Mark 1: 32-39

³² That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And 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.

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ 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.” ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Trinity Presbyterian Church February 4, 2018

“Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing”

Jesus’ ministry is catching fire. Things are really starting to cook. The news is out: there is a preacher in town who speaks with the authority of an ancient voice. With a word from his lips, evil buckles. With a touch of his hand the sick are raised up. The city folk gather around Peter’s door as Jesus runs a healing clinic out of his home. The disciples are taking numbers, triaging the people’s needs. We see family members pushing their loved ones in wheelchairs, addicts waiting in line scratching at their veins. See parents carrying a kiddo wearing a chemo cap in their arms. All of them are trying to meet with Jesus. He is working overtime—from sun up to sundown. After a long day—which melts into a long night—Jesus wakes up early before dawn, and he retreats to a quiet place to pray.

How are we doing when it comes to prayer? Where is a quiet space in our noisy lives to spend some time with God? It is no secret life is full, and ministry can be tiresome. Many of us work long hours trying to stay ahead of our bills. We pour out our energy at the job and then come home to be a caregiver for a parent or a spouse or our children. Then there’s project mode on the weekends or an extracurricular activity we’ve added to our plates. Just sprinkle in a few church activities on Sunday and *wallah*, watch prayer slip right off the radar. Not to mention, where can we go to go to pray these days? Where can we go without a dog’s cold, wet nose poking us telling us it’s time for breakfast? A parent can’t even escape into the sanctuary of the bathroom without a kid knocking, “Mom, are you in there?” She responds, “Of course I’m in here, I’m trying to pray!” It is a difficult discipline to pray, isn’t it? It’s difficult to keep the main thing the main thing. But after a long day of ministry, Jesus rises early and retreats to a quiet place to pray—to recharge, maybe even to let God heal his weariness. How long has it been? When was the last time we made the time to sit in a quiet place and pray?

Glance at the story and Jesus' prayer time gets interrupted too. The disciples are feeling anxious as they turn over stones trying to locate Jesus. After all, the healing line is getting longer. The people's needs are mounting. When Pete eventually finds Jesus praying he says, "What are you doing? Come on, there's more to do." Perhaps since the beginning there has always been more needs than resources. It creates anxiety in Peter and if we're honest, it creates anxiety in us. There are children hungry on weekends, and what do they do when school is cancelled on Mondays? There are homeless vets wandering the streets toting PTSD in their duffle bags. Racial disparities that are escalating. Immigration reform is urgent. Refugee relief. City workers not making a family wage. Transgender children living in isolation. Climate change and record-breaking disasters on our coasts. Then there is the opioid crisis. Human trafficking and sexual assault. Watershed problems on the Dan River. Title one schools plague our county. Let's not forget about voting rights! How is the church to respond to the needs when everyday there is something new to address in our world? The line is endless. It creates anxiety. Perhaps a powerless feeling that we aren't doing enough. We see it in Peter, maybe we feel it in ourselves. "Come on Jesus, we can all pray later! There's a long line of people who need us."

But do you remember Jesus' response? He says, "It's time to move on. It's time to spread the message in other places." Of course, we want Jesus to stay and heal everyone, but notice: Jesus knows his mission. He sets up a boundary, maybe he entrusts us with the rest. But he knows what he is here to do. The question is: do we? Do we know our mission? It seems the majority of churches these days do not know who they are, or the main thing God is calling them to do. Churches are stuck, spinning their wheels hoping to catch some traction. As a colleague once said, "We are running a mile wide, but only an inch deep, which translates into: we are doing everything, but really we aren't doing anything very well." If our mission is about hunger, then we are going to do more than collect canned goods but dig at the root for why there is hunger in the first place. If we are going to be about ministering to children, then we are going to have our children participate in everything we do. If God is calling us to convert our classrooms into mini apartments for Syrian refugees, then what choice do we have but to do it? Jesus' response is a surprise to us, but he is setting up a boundary. "It's time to move on." Jesus knows his mission. He knows what he is here to do.

So how do we know what God is inviting us into? How do we know our main thing? In our tradition, we ordain leaders who are called to pray and to discern to what God desires for this church. The problem is: we have fallen into the rut of having our elders manage the church for the rest of us, leaving no time for discernment or prayer. The small church is notorious for electing their members—some brand new—to take their turn with "managing" the church. Managing the building, the committees, the decisions, the duties. Managing, managing, and managing some more. But we do NOT ordain managers. We ordain leaders who take vows to pray, and to lead the church according to God's vision for us. Every year I send out exit

interviews for our elders who are rolling off the Session. One of the questions asks if their experience has brought them closer or farther from their spiritual life with God. I have not once received feedback saying it has brought them closer to God. The reason? They are not leading, but managing. Had one person say it felt like a second job, and her daughter even asked her if it was possible for her to get fired from the church. Friends, and please hear this with care and concern: I wonder if we've lost leaders, and have a difficult time every year finding leaders, because we've expected our elders to manage the church's affairs for us at the cost of their own spiritual health. Honestly, is this the type of system we want? Where duties preclude discernment and church practicalities out prioritize prayer?

We ordain spiritual leaders who pray. Who lead us in keeping the main thing the main thing. After all, whose job is it really to manage the church?