**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**Saint Dunstan’s Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**

**7 February 2021**

**Mark 1:29-39**

For years before the start of this Pandemic many of us lived by the rules of "The Coronary and Ulcer Club." COVID-19 forced many of the members of this club to quarantine, to return home, and some even lost their jobs. Then suddenly, many of us were sitting around, going out of our minds, tortured by the fact that our lives seemed to have come to a screeching halt. We had been so used to the rules of “The Coronary and Ulcer Club,” that having to quarantine was extremely upsetting for many of us. Before I continue, let me tell you what the rules of this club are: 1. Your job comes first. Forget everything else. 2. Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays are fine times to be working at the office. There will be no one there to bother you. 3. Always have your briefcase with you when not at your desk. This provides an opportunity to review completely all the troubles and worries of the day. 4. Never say "no" to a request. Always say "yes." 5. Accept all invitations to meetings, banquets, committees, etc. 6. All forms of recreation are a waste of time. 7. Never delegate responsibility to others; carry the entire load yourself. 8. If your work calls for traveling, work all day and travel at night to keep that appointment you made for eight the next morning. 9. No matter how many jobs you are already doing, remember you always can take on more.”

At first glance, Jesus of Nazareth seems to be following the rules of the club, 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 spirt. 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 tugged at his soul. 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 standpoint 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 he obviously knows that he must seize the day and continue to build momentum.

This is what his disciples expect. They know that the people need him, and they expect him to be there for them. And yet, in our passage today, Mark tells us at verse 35, “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 moment to be alone with his Father. The disciples do not quite understand and do not 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” and chased. I am sure the disciples wondered why Jesus was here alone, when there was so much need down below.

My friends these frantic demands and unrealistic expectations of the people accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. Repeatedly 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 do-gooder, always on-call and always on the go. But Jesus was much more. 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 was 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 needed the Gospel and for this reason Jesus needed to remain on the move.

There is a message here for all of us as our country continues to open more and more. Over the last few weeks, I have seen many in my own family return to their offices, hospitals, or social services agencies. Many in our own national and international church are opening their churches to a more regular schedule of services. All of this is good, but I pray that we may never forget the lessons learned during this pandemic. An overly ambitious schedule of activities had become the norm for many growing churches. We had become so busy “doing” things, that many of us simply did not have the time to find a quiet place and commune with our Father in heaven. Many of our churches had become busy social services agencies and were beginning to forget that our primary duty as followers of Jesus is to preach the Gospel of our Savior. We are here to offer freedom to the captives. We are here to lead people to a deeper relationship with God in his son, Jesus Christ. The social service aspect of our mission is just one of the many aspects of our mission. We cannot sacrifice a life of prayer and the preaching of the Gospel at the altar of our social service, any more 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. We are to help others, but we are also to share with them the good news of God in his son 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. There is always one more project at the job, one more report to write, one more sales call to make, and one more commitment to take care off. 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 to be alone 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.

This is an invitation for us today. We cannot sacrifice our relationships at the altar of our careers and our ambitions. We must set aside time for those we love. We must set time aside for God. Only God can help us realize what is truly important in our lives. Today I pray that, like Jesus, you may accept the challenge to create the space necessary for your relationship with God to grow. He loves you and he seeks to have a relationship with you. I pray today that you will work on your relationship with him starting this very day. Amen!