

“Moving On”
Mark 1:29-39

Anyone looking at my sermon title this morning and leaping to the conclusion that I would be announcing my imminent departure, will be disappointed or maybe, hopefully, relieved to learn that I will not be making that announcement. When I went to the doctor this week for something to deal with my yearly bout of the Central New York winter crud I did ask the nurse practitioner if people in Arizona got this sort of thing, and she said she didn't think so. But we're not moving to Arizona or anywhere else. At least not yet. The sermon is not about moving on in that sense.

Taken together, last week's Gospel reading and the one for today, make up a kind of “a day in the life of Jesus.” The action takes place in Capernaum, or *Kfar Nahum* (Nahum's Village), the town of Peter and Andrew, James and John, and also of Matthew, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Capernaum is important in the story of Jesus. Here he calls his first disciples, teaches in the synagogue, heals and casts out demons. Of all the places Jesus frequented, Capernaum, more than any other, was considered to be his home town. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, but when he was in Capernaum he was said to be “at home.” [1]

The day began in the synagogue where Jesus taught and where the people, as we read last week, were astounded at his teaching and his ability to cast out demons. After synagogue that morning Jesus and his friends did what we do – they went home for dinner. (Of course in our case we all stop at Wegman's first.) The home they went to was Peter's. And here, in this short passage in Mark, we learn something about Peter's personal life that we would not otherwise know, that he was married. For when they arrive at the house they discover that Peter's mother-in-law is sick with a fever. Unfortunately, in accordance with the culture of the day, no one thought it important enough to relate the names of either Peter's wife or his mother-in-law. Only the men were considered important.

So the poor woman is in bed with a fever and here comes Peter bringing all the boys home for dinner! (Or, another possibility that doesn't seem to have been considered by any of the commentaries is that she saw them coming and decided to go to bed and fake the fever. Just a thought.) In any case, according to Mark, when Jesus learned of her condition, he “took her by the hand and lifted her up” and “the fever left her,” and, as someone said, she was “able to wait on them like a good Jewish mama.” [2]

We don't know what happened after dinner. Sabbath afternoon naps? Picking apart the sermon from the morning? By evening, however, people suddenly began showing up at the house. At first it was just one or two sporadic visitors. “I saw what you did this morning at the synagogue with that man who had a demon, and I brought my son who can't walk. Could you pray for him?” But soon it became almost a mob. Mark says, “the whole city was gathered around the door.” Probably an exaggeration, but we get the idea. And he says that Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. All in all you would have to say that it was quite a day there in Capernaum. Not a bad start for a country boy from Nazareth with no prior experience, just starting out. Pretty heady.

But it's what happens the next morning that I would like to speak about: *In the morning, while it*

was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

This is still only the first chapter of Mark. We are only 39 verses into it, and already Jesus has spent 40 days alone in the wilderness, and now, again, he seeks solitude in what Mark describes as “a deserted place.” Why?

Several possibilities come to mind. First, for me personally, what comes to mind is that after spending a full day sort of dealing with the public, so to speak, Jesus may have needed to be alone.

As one who tests pretty strongly as an introvert, I could certainly understand if that was it. Some of us are like that. We get our energy from solitude, from being alone. It's not that we don't like being with people. We do. But it drains us. And in order to regain our energy, to get recharged, we need solitude. Recently four of us clergy types were talking and it turned out that all four of us described ourselves as introverts. That surprises people. Each of us chose a profession that requires a certain amount of extrovertive behavior. And yet, the role of pastor also involves a considerable amount of time spent in study and reflection – activities more suited to an introvert.

Was Jesus an introvert? I don't know. No one does. But the picture one gets from the Gospels is of someone who often found it necessary to be alone. One could make the case, as I think I often have, that solitude is necessary for anyone, introverts and extroverts alike, at least at some times, that without solitude there is no way to have a spiritual life.

In any case, Jesus arose early the next morning, while it was still very dark, slipped out of the house, through the darkened streets of Capernaum and out into the countryside to a deserted place. And there he prayed. The word “prayed” can take in a lot of different meanings. Some might read that to mean that Jesus knelt down and said prayers like many of us pray: “Dear God, please be with Peter's mother-in-law (although I'm sure he knew her name) so that her fever doesn't come back, and bless Peter's wife (and he knew her name too), for you know how difficult it must be to be married to that man...” and so on.

Somehow, though, I don't think that is what is meant when it says that he prayed. I could be wrong, but what I think Jesus went out to that lonely spot to do early that morning was to get himself oriented again. Some people might call that getting “centered.” He had just had a fabulous day and he was experiencing, perhaps for the very first time, what it meant to be lauded, praised, what it meant to be popular, a success. Handling success is as difficult as handling failure. Witness all of the Hollywood stars and highly paid sports idols who self-destruct, or politicians or mega-church pastors who get into trouble.

I think Jesus went out there that morning to get his head straight, to remember who he was and what he was about. And that, too, is praying. And, apparently, it was worth the effort. He discovered something in that time that he had alone. He figured something out about who he was and what it was he should be doing.

Meanwhile, of course, back at Peter's house, people are rising, washing up, and other people are starting to knock at the front door again, just as they had the night before. And then someone discovers that Jesus is nowhere in the house. He is gone. And so a search begins. The word Mark uses is that they “hunted for him,” and it means literally that they “tracked him down.” And when they finally locate him, their annoyance is evident when they say, with some amount of exasperation: *“Everyone is searching for you.”* In other words, “What's the matter

with you? You are keeping people waiting. You are needed. You have to perform. Why are you out here in the middle of nowhere when your public is clambering for you?"

When we decided, some nine years ago now, that it was time to leave our last church and we had started the process of finding a new one, but still before I had ever heard of a town named Auburn in Central New York, I had lunch my Executive Presbyter at that time, a man named Gary. We talked about a lot of things. But one thing that Gary said to me that day has stuck with me. He said to me, "the greatest gift you can give to your new congregation is to know who you are."

I knew what he meant. There are always pressures to be the person someone else expects you to be, someone else's image of "pastor." I remember thinking at the time that yes, that would be a great gift to give to a congregation, but what I wondered was, is it a gift that I am capable of giving? I'm not certain that when I came here nine years ago I could give it fully. But one gift this congregation has given to me is to help me to discover more fully who I am. And I think I can give it now.

Jesus knew who he was. And when they came for him that morning, when they tracked him down and more or less demanded of him that he return because "everyone is searching for you," Jesus was ready. He had his answer. It seems quite possible to me that here, near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he made a decision about the shape of his ministry, what form it would take. He could have chosen to stay there in Capernaum where he was obviously well received. He could have been settled, hung out a shingle, set up his headquarters there and let people come to him. But if he considered that, he didn't choose that. Instead he decided on an itinerant ministry, going from town to town, always starting over again with new people, always on the move.

The Catholic scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests that Jesus' itinerancy, or even vagrancy, was not only part of his method, but also part of his message. His itinerancy was "a symbolic repudiation of the hierarchical system" symbolizing "unbrokered egalitarianism available openly

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and freely to all alike." I think that what he is saying is that by being an itinerant, even a vagrant, a vagabond, he was not a part of the landed gentry. His existence bordered on homelessness, which made him accessible to certain folks.

"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." I don't know about you, but when I hear those words I feel something of a stirring inside. Where is God calling us? What is God calling us to do? We've got our shingle hung out there, our sign out front. People can come if they like. We're pretty settled. But there are other villages, other towns, other people, other needs.

Back in 1861 people were settled also. The Rev. Henry Fowler had one of the primo pulpits in Auburn – Second Presbyterian, right down town. A plum pulpit, what is known as a "tall steeple" church. The Rev. Henry Fowler, Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church. Who would want to jeopardize that? But there was a fire in his belly. It had to do with the plight of millions of people living in bondage. We don't know how it all happened, but here is how it may have happened. Some of the elders at Second might very well have come to him and suggested to him that maybe he could lighten up a little on abolition. It wasn't that they were against abolition. It's just that they didn't want to hear about it so often maybe. But apparently he wasn't able to lighten up and was asked to leave. And those sixty people who formed Central Church also felt a stirring within them. This was no time to be settled. They were moving on.

And so they came together and they formed a new church.

Now we are the settled ones. The church has been here nearly 150 years. Solid. Stable. Respected. So what is stirring in you? What is stirring in this church? Where are the other towns for us? How do we keep moving on?

[1] Unger's Bible Dictionary

[2] Grant Gallop

[3] Jesus at 2000, p.39