



Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 7 February 2021

READINGS

Isaiah 40: 21-31; Psalm 147: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

Jesus heals many

When preparing for today's message, I came across a description of the gospel passage titled "Jesus' Busy Day." Though that wasn't my original interpretation of the passage, the idea of busyness vs balance made me pause. If we listen to Mark's gospel with that in mind, we will all relate to the sense of Jesus being pulled in many directions at the same time. Jesus is followed by demanding crowds and disciples; the story focuses on actions and movement. And yet we notice it's not just a public story, but also a personal one, not one of pure action, but also of contemplation.

The theme of busyness vs balance appealed to me because 'Balance,' has become a key word for me this year. Not that I in any way resolve to attain this goal of balance, but I set it as my task to explore what exactly it means, and how one might find it, and why it is so difficult for many of us to achieve. We live busy lives that throw us off balance, pulled between the importance of work, family, friends, church, rest, the necessity of physical exercise, the importance of nourishing our spiritual life and so on and so on. So I set about watching numerous TED Talks, reading articles and holding group discussions to make some sense of what people define as balance. As we revisit this episode in Mark's gospel, I hope to be able to illustrate some of the principles that may be helpful for us.

Jesus has left the synagogue and gone straight to the home of Simon and Andrew. There he finds Simon's mother-in-law ill in bed. He goes to her, takes her by the hand and instantly, she is healed. Now more than ever, we can appreciate the meaning of that touch, since Covid has prevented us from reaching out to one another physically when we need it most. There, alongside her bed, Jesus meets Simon's mother-in-law at her point of need. Mark tells us that immediately she got up and began to wait on them. He makes the point, not because the men could not make their own sandwiches, but because he wanted to demonstrate the immediate healing linked directly to Jesus' power. We don't need to focus on the act of service, but rather on the gift of hospitality that Simon's mother-in-law could give, and what that restoration must have meant to her. This year, many of us have seen our loved ones too ill to get up and make a cup of tea, and we have been denied the opportunity to hold them and so this year, we read the story with new eyes as a result.

The story continues. I wonder who went out and spread the word, because that evening great crowd came to the house and Mark says the people brought to Jesus **all** the sick and demon-possessed. "The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed **many** who had various diseases". Stories of instant healing seem almost cruel in the face of the illness and death that surround us. Jesus' mission was not focused on the physical. It is we who shine the spotlight on each physical miracle, we who have glamourised the healing and turned Jesus into a type of magician. He healed many, not all.

There is Jesus the celebrity but who is this other Jesus, the one who eludes the crowds, seeks out deserted places, prays in the dark, and hides from his disciples so that they have to “hunt” for him? His mission, of bringing the realm of God to earth, his task of restoration to wholeness of community, to establish peace and justice on earth and bridge the gulf between God and humanity is more mysterious than the outer acts of healing, and it leads us also to seek beyond the physical signs to find the meaning.

Reading further, we understand more. After his miraculous deeds, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” You know how I spoke about pulled in many directions? Isn’t that feeling captured in those words...”Everyone is looking for you!”. How often have we felt that way? Jesus had withdrawn in solitude to pray, and we read of him doing this again and again at critical moments in which he connected with God and was restored. This practice demonstrates something so necessary and also so obvious when looking at balance : between busyness and stillness, between crowds, and solitude, between action and prayer, between noise and silence.

Here’s where I want to share what all those TED Talks and discussion groups and articles taught me about balance: I have just listed a set of contrasts. This vs that - but human balance is not about putting one thing against the other as if on a set of scales. Nothing that we have read here should be interpreted as *this vs that*, neither one is better or worse. They don’t exist in isolation from each other or in opposition to each other. It is the action of the story that feeds the need for silence and solitude, and it is the contemplation and prayer that energises and moves Jesus (and us) back out into action. When we speak of balance, it is unique to each person, and a better word perhaps is equilibrium. We can picture of a flow of energy, sometimes quite wobbly, where we are making adjustments all the time to stay upright, and other times very grounded and certain.

I think I have learned about two types of balance:

The first is the one seen in a handstand, or a ballerina balancing on one leg, or a pilates pose. The balance of stillness. To achieve this, I learned that for this balance, on a physical level, you need to have a strong core (the major muscles that stabilise and centre you) or else you will wobble all over the place and fall down. It is the same when it comes to spiritual stillness. I believe it is the discipline of prayer, of withdrawing and contemplating that strengthens this inner core. For some it is easier than others – we should not compare and beat ourselves up if it is more difficult for us, but I do think we can follow Jesus’ example and set up a rhythm or pattern that includes stillness to strengthen our spiritual core.

The second form of balance is one that is compared to riding a bicycle. In this type, it is easier to stay balanced if you are in motion, if you have movement and purpose that drives you. We see this in Jesus’ ability to meet each person at their point of need, in Jesus movement and motion from synagogue to home to private prayer, and then out further to minister in a wider area across Galilee. When we ride a bicycle, we need to look up and out, just as Jesus does when he moves into action after his time of prayer. He did not return to the village and all the people seeking him there. His prayer had reconnected him with his greater call and purpose and the gospel passage ends with Jesus replying, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. *That is why I have come.*”

In the same way as riding a bicycle, it is easier for us to balance when we have purpose and when we understand what our unique calling is. It is not to be all things to all people.

I pray that each one of us would move or flow steadily between looking inward and looking outward. In this flow or equilibrium demonstrated by Jesus, we will discover what it is that we are *called* to do, and how to share our unique calling in our community in ways that are purposeful and intentional. Ways that have depth, not ways that give the *illusion* of purpose like our busyness often does. Being “busy” often robs us of the real connection and presence that Jesus displayed whether alone, or with his disciples or in a crowd; in the privacy of the home of Simon and Andrew, as well as in the public synagogues.