

Wesley United Methodist Church
February 7, 2021
Learning What Jesus Values
Priorities
Scripture: Mark 1:29-39

Do you ever feel like you are being pulled in many different directions at the same time? Like everyone wants something different from you and everyone wants it now? It's not a good feeling, is it? And the reality is that it often leads to feeling flustered, frustrated, and like you never really managed to get the things done you wanted to do or that you thought were important. It's a common experience for many of us.

We want to be able to control our own day and our own activities and be successful at completing our "to-do list". But when we allow ourselves to be controlled by what others ask or demand of us, we are letting other people determine and set our priorities. We are letting others decide where we spend our time and energy and letting them decide for us what is most important.

I'd love to be able to tell you that I never have this problem; that I know what my priorities are and that I always let my priorities guide what I do, but that wouldn't be the truth – and I do value truth telling as a priority. The truth is that, like most people, I can get drawn into someone else's expectations and that more than I care to admit, I let someone else set the priorities for how I spend my time and energy.

For the last few weeks, we've been looking at the things Jesus values and how they can make a difference in our lives. Mark's gospel gives us good insights into what was important early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus was baptized by John, and then was led into the wilderness where he was tempted and learned to get his priorities in order early on. He began to preach and to call people to change their hearts and trust the good news from God.

Then Jesus showed us that he values teamwork as he called his disciples, and us, to be a team that works together for God. He went into a synagogue to teach and people were amazed because he taught as one who knew what he was talking about it, one with authority, and put it into action. He showed us what it is to live with authenticity as his actions and his words agreed, not only with each other, but also with God's will.

Today we find Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and the crowd gets excited. Word about him spread throughout Galilee and that night the whole town gathered around as he healed those who were sick. Jesus was well on his way to having a career as a popular healer. Few things could make someone happier than having themselves or their loved ones healed. People would have been willing to travel from far away to come to this amazing man who could heal those who were suffering.

Early the next morning, everyone was looking for him. They were eager to continue what he had been doing the night before, but Jesus wasn't to be found. His disciples went looking for him and discovered him off by himself. Mark tells us that "Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer."

Jesus knew that he needed to spend time alone with God. He knew that he needed to spend time alone in prayer. It was important enough for him that he made time for it – indeed, made it the first priority of the day. Early in the morning, well before sunrise, he went off to be alone in prayer.

I can almost hear the disciples that morning when they found him. "Jesus, what are you doing out here, by yourself? Everyone's looking for you. Don't let them down. You have a busy day ahead of you, Let's get started. There are a lot of people wanting to be healed. Stop wasting time, let's go."

Imagine their surprise when instead of going with them and doing what they believed was most important, Jesus declared his own priorities – ones that had been reinforced in his quiet time of prayer. Instead of meekly following them back to where people were waiting for him, instead of succumbing to the temptation to be popular by healing others, he said, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come."

Healing was important – and certainly a top priority for those who were in need of healing – and throughout his ministry, Jesus would do a lot more healing. But the top priority was not to be a popular healer. His top priority was to go to other villages to preach, to share God's good news. His top priority was to feed people with words that would carry them throughout life.

Stephen Covey said, “You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage – pleasantly, smilingly, non-apologetically – to say, ‘no’ to other things. And the way you do that is by having a bigger ‘yes’ burning inside. The enemy of the ‘best’ is often the ‘good’.”ⁱ

Healing people was definitely good. Being a popular teacher was definitely good. But for Jesus there was a bigger ‘yes’ burning inside him that allowed him “pleasantly, smilingly, non-apologetically” to say “no” to other things.

So many times, the things that pull at us from different directions are good things and we want to be able to do them all. But we need to pay attention to when the good things are keeping us away from the better things and the best thing of all.

One of the commentators I read this week pointed out that “Translating Jesus’ message into practice is a struggle well known to the imperfect but ever faithful Paul.” She noted that in the reading we heard from 1st Corinthians, Paul was defending himself from attack but that he maintained “the high ground by keeping the focus on what was important – the message, not the messenger.”ⁱⁱ

You may remember that initially Paul was not preaching about Jesus. In fact, he was actively seeking followers of Jesus so that he could have them thrown in prison. But after a dramatic experience, he became a passionate follower of Jesus and devoted his life to the priority of teaching others about Jesus. In seeking to be faithful to this top priority, he would go into various cities, towns, and even different cultures. He was intentional about finding ways to identify with people wherever he was so that he could have an opening to tell them about Jesus.

In Acts 17, he even went into the city of Athens where he saw statues honoring many different gods. He saw one inscribed to “An unknown god”. Paul appealed to their desire to know about all the gods that they thought existed and to be sure not to offend one by missing him. Paul told them that he was there to tell them about this “unknown god.”

Paul’s number one priority was to relate to people by meeting them where he found them so that he could tell them about Jesus. When people tried to stop him from preaching, he refused to let them do that. He refused to let his personal safety have a higher priority than the bigger “yes” within him, telling others about Jesus.

Now most of us are unlikely to find ourselves in the kinds of situations in which Paul found himself, but we too have opportunities to bring the good news about Jesus to a world that desperately needs to know about him. We do this simply by being authentic in our relationship with Jesus, by sharing the good news through our words and actions, and by not corrupting his message into something that drives people away from him.

But there are always those competing voices, those demanding voices telling us what we should be doing, trying to set our priorities for us. And those voices can be very strong and very convincing. What we see in Jesus' life in the passage from Mark and in many other places is a dialogue between the times of active ministry and the times of prayer-filled solitude. During the Lenten season, by the way, we will be looking at some of the ways that we can be part of that dialogue and listen more intently to God and less intently to those competing voices.

Bill Wylie Kellermann wrote an article called "A Day in the Life"ⁱⁱⁱ In it he notes that Paul moved through social and cultural boundaries with ease and that this gave him a freedom in which he aspired to be like Christ who became a servant to all. In too many ways today, it seems that many Christians aspire to be over others, to talk down to them, and to judge them and scare them into some sort of conversion. But Paul found things in common with people so that he could talk with them. Jesus showed his love for people that drew people to him.

As Kellermann pointed out, if we look at a day in the life of Jesus, we see a freedom where he moves easily among the sick and others who crowded around to hear and see him. In fact, in Mark's gospel today, he actively goes off in search of them to bring them the good news.

But he was also free to withdraw. "Jesus is not in bondage to time or circumstance. The pattern of his day, set early in Mark's gospel, seems designed to preserve spiritual sanity. There is a rhythm between public and private time, between action and contemplation. Simon and his friends see the solitude of morning prayer as a disruption of a busy schedule, but this is the very thing that turns a day of despair into a day of freedom."^{iv}

This is a model that we all need.

We have been dealing with COVID 19 for about a year now. It has changed all our lives and we will be dealing with this for some time to come. This is a marathon – not a sprint – and we need to deal with it as we would a marathon.

There are days when my schedule is so full that I find myself running from one thing to another and getting lost in the middle of competing demands and priorities. However, I also know that when I am very intentional about making a quiet time with God the first priority of the day, it is easier to stay focused on what is most important throughout the day.

My spiritual life – our spiritual lives – need to be designed for a marathon – not a sprint. I can manage one day without spending time in prayer or meditation and I can do okay. But stretch that one day into two or three and I can feel things start to unravel. Life is a marathon – not a sprint. We need long term plans and routines in our lives.

Jesus' model of living with a dialogue between the times of active ministry and reflective solitude is important for us. We need the balance of time in silent reflection and time in actively living among the demands of life. It is important for us to find time, or make time, in our daily lives to allow space for the best thing, so that we are also able to then participate in the good things of life. In doing so, we can better identify the priorities of any given moment, because we know the number one priority of nurturing our relationship with God, who helps us keep all the other good things in balance.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that everyone gets tired. "Even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." When God is our priority, God will renew our strength and help us keep our priorities in order – despite multiple demands.

To quote Stephen Covey once more, he also said, that the "key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities."^v The reality is that each of us is given the same 24 hours in each day and we can and will find time for the things that we really think are important. I invite us to pay attention to how we are spending our time and energy and ask ourselves if this reflects what we proclaim are our priorities. Let us ask God to help us identify our true priorities and to live them out. Let us ask God to help us have the same priorities that Jesus had.

Let us pray:

Our loving God, Jesus showed us that even he needed to take time to be alone with you in prayer. How then can we think that we don't need to do that? Help us to pay attention to what our actions proclaim about our priorities and help us to live in ways that authentically reflect our relationship with you and your priority in our lives. There are so many voices clamoring for our attention that we cannot do this by ourselves. Help us to turn to you for the strength, guidance, and power to keep our priorities in order. Amen.

ⁱ Covey, Stephen. Exact source unknown. I found this quote on Google, attributed to Stephen Covey but without specific attribution.

ⁱⁱ Bruzzese, Michaela "From Message to Church" in Preaching the Word, Sojourner's resource for 2/7/2021

ⁱⁱⁱ Kellermann, Bill Wylie. "A Day in the Life" in Preaching the Word. 2/7/2021

^{iv} Ibid

^v Covey, Stephen. Exact source unknown.