

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 4, 2018

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Love in the Limits

Mark 1:29-39

INTRODUCTION

The last few Sundays, we have been following Jesus through his ministry in Galilee, as told in the Gospel of Mark. We are still in the first chapter! Indeed, the lectionary readings have all taken place during *one day* in the village of Capernaum.

This morning, the reading follows what happened after the synagogue service of worship where Jesus taught and healed people. It reminds us of the old days when people would come home from church to Sunday dinner. Jesus and the disciples come back to Peter's home, only to find that the key kitchen person was sick. He continues to offer his healing gifts, and from there, we learn how he navigates the expectations of the others in order to carry out God's mission.

THE READING

29 As soon as they²⁹ left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And 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. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' ³⁸He 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.' ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

SERMON

Years ago, my husband Steve and I were sent by the church as Global Mission Partners¹ to Paris, France, (some mission trip, aye?) where we worked about three years with an urban mission connected to the French Reformed Church. One dimension of our ministry was assistance to immigrants. This is how we met Abijah and Esther Duah.

Abijah had been the chauffeur to a government official in Ghana, but when the regime was overthrown, he had to flee for his life. He stowed away on a tanker bound for Great Britain, but when it stopped in Calais, he was discovered and forced off. So Abijah had to begin his life as a refugee in France instead. Because we spoke English, we were enlisted as translators and to accompany him in his quest for French citizenship.

Eventually, his wife, Esther, joined him. She and I searched high and low for an apartment they could rent – a long, tedious process. I suspect that several doors closed to us because we were two foreigners, one black and one white, but I'm sure my shortcomings with the French language and the country's bureaucracy didn't help! Fortunately, months later, they did find a settled home.

All of us, who seek to carry out God's mission of love, eventually come up against our limits. For instance, teachers may not be able to motivate certain students. Social workers find they don't have sufficient resources for their clients. Non-profit entrepreneurs may meet insurmountable regulations. Ministers, too, may miss the mark in their preaching. For example, after a very long and boring sermon, the parishioners of a particular congregation filed out, saying nothing to the minister. But at the end of the line was a person who commented: "Pastor, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!" This thrilled the preacher: "Tell me why!" "Well, it reminded me of the Peace of God because it passed all understanding and the Love of God because it endured forever!" Meeting our limits.

Youth, it's my guess that during your mission trip to the Rio Grande Valley, you will face moments when you feel like you don't have the skills you need, or when the need around you seems beyond your capacity. You are not alone!

Even Jesus, who embodied the fullness of God, faced limitations as he went about God's mission of love. Now, I don't think that Jesus was ever boring, but during this visit to Capernaum, as powerful as his sermons were and as mighty, his works of healing, Jesus was

¹Global Mission Partners from the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are mission personnel sent from the denominations for two to three-year terms at the invitation of partner denominations in other parts of the world. At the time we were appointed – 1983-1986 – the program was called "Fraternal Workers." We were in language school in Southern France for six months, and then relocated to the 18th arrondissement of Paris to work with La Mission Populaire de France and L'eglise Reformee du Montmartre.

not able to be everywhere and minister to everyone. His physicality and resistance against him hindered the number he could help.

How did Jesus handle these limitations? How can you and I? I think that these verses from Mark give us some clues.

After that synagogue service, we read that Peter invited Jesus to his home, and finding his mother-in-law sick with a fever, Jesus “took her by the hand and lifted her up.” This reminds me that this congregation has stated its desire for more opportunities to do “hands-on mission.” The attention that Jesus gave Peter’s mother-in-law was not the type of a celebrity in a parade, or a handshaking politician. Jesus looked her in the eye, focused upon her well-being, and reached out to touch. Later, also, he had compassion upon the group of the hurting that gathered at Peter’s door. Jesus handled his limits by embracing them and being present to others. In other words, the way that Jesus loved was in the limits.

Next, the text tells us that Jesus got up early and went away from town to find some quiet. He had to make a decision about whether to stay or to go. Sometimes churches get caught up in a false debate between local and global mission, as if one is first and better than the other, but Jesus didn’t treat the question this way. He certainly could’ve stayed as the local, settled pastor of Capernaum; there’d likely have been ignorance and sickness enough to keep him busy, but he felt the divine tug to spread the Good News, and made an intentional choice to leave Capernaum for the surrounding villages. I think here of the wording of TriCon’s Vision: you want to honor God through service and mission, and there are yet decisions to make about how and where with God’s direction. Jesus handled his limits by embracing them and being present to God’s call. Once again, we see that he loved in the limits.

In the final scene, the disciples interrupt Jesus at prayer. They are anxious because their needy neighbors have come to them, and they want to be able to help their community, but Jesus didn’t leave a note, and all of them have been out looking for him “everywhere!” The disciples and the crowds want Jesus to meet their needs and expectations on their timeline, and while he was present to others, Jesus was also present to himself. He did not allow himself to be “tossed to and fro” by every whim and opinion, but stayed in his own skin, grounded and anchored. Jesus handled his limits by embracing them, and remaining present to his discernment of God’s direction. He replied firmly: “This is who I am and what I came to do; let’s go.” Thereby, Jesus was able to love in the limits.

Remember: participating in God’s mission of love does not mean being something you are not. As Yvonne Gilmore has expressed it: “If you lose you, God can’t use you!”

Alexander Irvine tells the story of his Irish mother, who used to say to him: “Listen dear...God takes a hand wherever he can find it and does what he likes with it. Sometimes he takes a bishop’s hand and lays it on a child’s head in benediction, the hand of a...doctor to

relieve pain, the hand of...an old [woman] like me to...comfort a neighbor. But they're all hands touched by his Spirit, and [God's] Spirit is everywhere looking for hands to use."²

²Alexander Irvine, *My Lady of the Chimney Corner* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1913).