

February 7, 2021
Mark 1:29-39

Epiphany 5
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“Doing What Must Be Done”

“Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” – 1 Corinthians 13:11.

There is great wisdom in St. Paul’s words, but I must confess that while I became an adult decades ago, there I times when I still think and reason like a child. One of the ways in which this often happens is when I am wrestling with a decision between doing what must be done and doing what I want to do. It was a conflict that I often faced as a child:

- I would rather play with my friends after school, but I needed to do my homework.
- I would rather watch TV, but I needed to do my chores.
- I would rather keep my toys to myself, but I needed to share them with others.

For Jesus, doing what must be done meant accomplishing *“what I came out to do”* (Mark 1:38), proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth, a message that could not be contained in one place (such as Capernaum) but shared in the “neighbouring towns” and “throughout Galilee,” fulfilling the Will of God as it was proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah:

- “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn ...” – Isaiah 61:1-2.

Jesus begins his ministry with absolute certainty as to what he must do to accomplish God’s Will, proclaiming that *“the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* (1:14-15). He would not let the devil deter him from fulfilling this mission, even though these satanic temptations were very appealing, presenting him with a tantalizing alternative of doing what he might have desired instead of doing what he needed to accomplish as the Son of God. Jesus experienced the temptation to use his divine power and authority for his own purposes; but he remained faithful to his call in that *“he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”* (Philippians 2:6-7). Jesus experienced the temptation to do what he wanted versus doing what he needed to accomplish, and therefore Jesus *“knows our every weakness,”* because *“we do not have a high priest who was unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus knew that his mission and purpose was to do what must be done to accomplish God’s Will of redeeming all humanity; he was

steadfast in his determination that *“today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”* (Luke 13:33).

In the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel, the Evangelist alternates between scenes in which Jesus is surrounded by a crowd and others in which he teaches his disciples alone inside a house (*“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but explained everything in private to his disciples.”* – 4:33-34). Having left the synagogue in Capernaum where he had healed the man with an unclean spirit, Jesus enters the house of Simon and Andrew, where *“Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever”* (1:30). Jesus immediately cures the woman: *“he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them”* (1:31). She is fully restored to health so that she may “serve” (*diakoneo*), taking on the role of a follower of the Son of Man who *“came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* (10:45). Jesus continues his healing ministry as *“the whole city was gathered around the door ... 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”* (1:33-34). Jesus’ healing ministry serves two purposes: it brings immediate relief and restoration to the person who is suffering, and it offers a sign of the Kingdom of God in which *“the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy”* (Isaiah 35:5-6).

- “Therefore we should throw ourselves with all our hearts onto the truthfulness of God who gave his promise, and we should turn ourselves away from what we know of the wrath of God, and we will be chosen and saved.” – Martin Luther.

The next morning, Jesus leaves Peter’s house well before dawn and *“went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed”* (1:35). Such “a deserted place” may be more theological than geographical; Jesus was in the desert earlier, in temptation, struggling with the nature of ministry before him. Now that this ministry has begun, he has become famous, the crowds are swelling, and people are searching for him and asking him to return to Capernaum. This pattern of engaging large crowds followed by going off by himself for times of prayer is repeated many times in the Gospels and offers a pattern for the life of a Christian that alternates between periods of quietness and prayer followed by engaging in ministry among the people of God.

- “To live a Christian life means to live *in* the world without being *of* it. It is in solitude that this inner freedom can grow. Jesus went to a lonely place to pray, that is, to grow in the awareness that all the power he had was given to him; that all the words he spoke came from his Father; and that all the works he did were really not his own but the works of the One who sent him.” – Henri Nouwen.

When Simon and his companions find Jesus, they report to him that *“everyone is searching for you”* (1:37), implying that the people of Capernaum want him to return and resume his healing ministry in that city. But Jesus insists that his ministry cannot be contained to that one place: *“Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”* (1:38). The decision to broaden the mission of preaching to the whole of Galilee does not mean that Jesus is turning his back on or rejecting the people of Capernaum; the good news of

the reign of God – that is, of the time and place of God’s favour as shown in Jesus’ ministry – is to be widely shared. Jesus knows that “*what I came out to do*” is to proclaim the gospel message of the Kingdom of God; “*that the widespread dissemination of the gospel of God is the very purpose of Jesus’ life is clear to him*” (Fred Craddock). Jesus refused to allow Simon and his companions to impose their restrictions on the work of the kingdom. Jesus knew that he must “travel on” (*poreuomai*), carrying the good news of the kingdom to other towns. God’s redemptive purpose propels Jesus to carry the preaching of the kingdom – which included “*proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons*” (1:39) – throughout all the land of the Jewish people.

- “Mark presents us with a Jesus who chooses to remain remote but also seeks to stay on the move. He prays in an isolated place and eludes the crowds, but then he goes on to other areas, because he understands his purpose as ‘proclaiming’ . . . His preaching activity, the full range of his public ministry, is performative and effective: it demonstrates what God’s reign looks like, and it has real effects as it delivers people, heals people, restores people to community, forgives people, and speaks truth to power.” – Matt Skinner.

Jesus knew that doing what must be done meant that he could not stay in one place but needed to bring the message of the Kingdom of God to other towns and places where people were yearning for the good news that only God’s Word could provide. Jesus teaches his would-be followers that being his disciple would mean that they would also need to put aside doing what they wanted so that they might do what must be done as followers of our Lord and Saviour: “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*” (Matthew 8:20). Walking in the path of discipleship meant putting aside the “childish ways” that look only to the satisfaction of one’s wishes and desires; Jesus teaches his disciples that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24). Walking as a child of God means that we live in accordance with the teaching of the prophet Micah that “*he has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8). It means “*having the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus ... who humbled himself and because obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*” (Philippians 2:5, 8).

- “Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him. This he should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval.” – Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520.

The Church of Jesus Christ into which we have been incorporated in Holy Baptism is the assembly of God’s people that endeavors to fulfill God’s Will, to do what must be done to accomplish what God desire for God’s holy people. We are called to pray “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*” knowing that the kingdom of God comes “*whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through the Holy Spirit’s grace we believe God’s hold word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity,*” and that God’s Will might be done in and through us so that in and among us “*God strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his word and in faith until the end of our lives. This is God’s gracious and good will*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “This prayer demolishes the devices of all the tyrants who say, ‘This is the way we will do it: our will must be done!’ ... But we say one little petition: ‘Dear Father, thy will be done!’ That is, say to them that not their, but thy will be done! Then whatever our enemies counsel will not prevail. But our will too must be broken; otherwise God’s name will not be hallowed in us and his kingdom will not come to us.” – Luther, *Sermons on the Catechism*, 1529.

The struggle between doing what we want vs. doing what needs to be done is constant, a battle between our childish, selfish desires against a mature faith which does “*nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*” (Philippians 2:3-4). Our call as the people of God is to commit ourselves to accomplishing God’s Will for us as the baptized people of God, “*to grow in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.*” (Ephesians 4:15-16). Recognizing that our call as the Church of Jesus Christ is to follow our Lord in doing what must be done so that we might live in the knowledge that “*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word*” (ELW Hymn 729).

- “Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church. It is ‘*sent out*’ (that is what the word ‘*apostolic*’ means), usually against its will, by the God who has called it into being, because of love for the world ... A Church that is hived off to itself and was content to be a comfortable ‘fellowship’ would contradict in the most flagrant way the whole message of the New Testament.” – Douglas John Hall.

There are times when I must confess that I fall prey to “childish ways,” doing what I desire instead of what I need to do. It is easy to give into our selfish desires; but the love that liberates us from “sin, death, and the power of the devil,” the love that claims us in Holy Baptism as children of God, is the love of which Paul speaks in the famous words of his first letter to the Corinthians:

- “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” – 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Jesus knew that doing what must be done meant that he could not stay in one place, that a life devoted to his own wants and desires was not possible if he was to fulfill his mission of proclaiming the good news of God’s Kingdom in the “neighbouring towns” and throughout Galilee. As Jesus calls his apostles to “*be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8), our call as the apostolic church of this age is to pray that God will continue to give us strength and wisdom to do what we must do as “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). May we commit ourselves to do what we must do as the Church of Jesus Christ, that all may know God’s love!

Amen