

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel
February 7, 2021 Stream Mass
5th Sunday of Year B Mark 1:29-39

Do you think that Jesus could sometimes have had a “bad day?” Do you think Jesus could ever have gotten “stressed out?” In today’s gospel His disciples think He’s having a great day. All of the townspeople have come out to see Him; He cured their sick, and when word got out that He was there, even more showed up. Simon and Andrew, James and John, no doubt think that the day has been a great success. But something is wrong; they can’t find Jesus; He had to get away from it all; He had to step out of the craziness of the moment. The disciples have to track Jesus down, and finally they find him in a deserted place, alone in prayer. Jesus is at a crisis point; He is trying to sort things out—what is His mission, what is His ministry all about?

There appears to be a disconnect between the adulation of the crowds and the stress Jesus is experiencing. Naturally the people want Jesus to stay in their town, to be there wonder-worker. But they are missing the point of what these cures and healings are all about. The miracles are signs pointing beyond themselves, to reveal how God is at work in Jesus to heal a broken world. The miracles of Jesus are just signs; they are not themselves the sum and substance of His ministry. No doubt the crowds would be quite content with just that—the miracles. So, to Simon’s surprise, Jesus announces that He has to leave this apparent success behind. His mission is to preach to the other villages—to announce the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, is at hand to heal a broken and fragmented world. As dramatic, as desirable, too, as these miracles may be for the crowd of people in that town, they are only part of His mission, of His ministry. It is during His time alone, in those moments of prayer, that Jesus has to sort out the conflicting claims of the people who would want nothing more than have Him stay in their town performing miracles, and what he perceives as the Father’s will for Him.

Jesus is indeed the Messiah, God’s “Chosen One,” but He does not have a messianic complex. He does not feel compelled to bail out every individual from the mess in which they find themselves. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read these words referring to Jesus, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.” Today’s Gospel presents us with one such moment of temptation, of struggle, in the life of Jesus and it can provide some insights as to how we can deal with the same in our own lives.

One of the hard facts of life may be that the very thing we are best at, the thing we excel in being or doing, can at the same time be our downfall. So, the person who is a natural "caregiver," or the one who is the ideal "problem-solver," can find themselves in situations where they are so put upon by those they think they are there to help, that in the end they become exhausted, worn down and perhaps, worst of all, embittered and resentful. No one can play the role of "Lady bountiful" or "Mr. Fix-it" forever, without realizing they can't always be there for all the people in their lives in all situations all the time; that they are only human; that there are limits to their resources, physical and emotional; that, at times, like Jesus in today's Gospel, they have to move on and allow those recipients of their time and attention to find ways to help themselves. And because we are human, if we find ourselves in that situation, we might have to ask ourselves, "Am I really doing all this for them, or am I doing it for me? Does doing all this make me feel needed and important?" Although I may appear to have their best interests at heart, and may be very successful in helping them, is it actually my own needs that are being served; am I encouraging people to become dependent on me?

Again, today's Gospel depicts a scene of struggle, of temptation in the life of Jesus, and it shows us how we can overcome the danger of falling into the same trap. Amidst the excitement of gratitude and congratulation, of admiration and wonder, Jesus has to get away. He has to be alone just by Himself to pray, to place Himself in communion with the One whom He calls God and Father. Prayer can take a variety of forms, and here we see an example of what it can be for us—simply to place ourselves in God's presence, to reflect on what am I supposed to be about, on what I should be doing with my life, and more specifically how should I be dealing with the people in my life. It is a time to sort out priorities, motivations and resources—to distinguish appearances, even the appearance of success, from what is really going on.

The words that Simon says to Jesus may have been said to anyone of us at some time or another, as well, "Everyone is looking for you; everyone wants a piece of you; they all want you to be there just for them"—parent, pastor, spouse, friend, boss. I am sure every parent has felt this way, when all the kids are looking for your undivided attention, or you have to jump in as a referee when they are fighting with each other. I have felt that way too when, for example, in another parish I received a phone call one Saturday morning at seven o'clock from an irate parent complaining that his son did not get enough "court time" in the CYO basketball game the night before. So, we might have to ask ourselves, "How long can I keep doing this before I am simply burned out, used up, or get ticked off at them all?" And, maybe someone else can do the job besides me; maybe, best of all, those I am trying to help can learn to do it for themselves."

One aspect of prayer is trying to discover what is God's will for me, and, in that situation, to recognize how my own will may be encouraging me to "play God," in managing or controlling the lives of people I have allowed to become overly dependent upon me. If I may draw an analogy, this kind of prayer does for us what punctuation does in a sentence. (I realize that in this age of texting, things like punctuation, spelling and grammar are going the way of the dinosaur, but I guess I am sufficiently "old school" that I still think punctuation serves a useful purpose. "What punctuation does in reading a sentence is that it helps us see when we have to slow down. Tiny things like commas, semicolons, dashes and periods allow us to see where we have to pause, what gets the emphasis, and finally when we just have to stop. Life without prayer can be like a sentence without punctuation. It can run on and on and on, so that you are never quite sure where it is headed. Or, it can be just flashes or bursts of words, so episodic and disjointed that it has no coherence--all over the place, with none of the pieces fitting together. Prayer is like punctuation. It provides order, it gives clarity, it subordinates what is less important to what is central. As with grammar, so with life, punctuation and prayer are essential.

Let us learn from Jesus in today's Gospel--the Jesus who is not remote and distant, but a Jesus who is very much like ourselves. Do what he does. When we feel swamped, when we feel put upon, take the time out to be alone and pray. Simply place ourselves in God's presence to sort out priorities, motivations and our personal resources, what I can do and what I can't do; to discover whose will is really at work--God's or my own, my own desire to feel needed and important. Then, released from the burden of having to meet the unfair and perhaps unrealistic expectations of others, we can do what is really best for them and for ourselves, all the while continuing to be the agents of God's healing and compassion.