

Fifth Sunday
after Epiphany
February 4, 2018

Dr. Susan F.
Dewyngaert

Isaiah 40:27-31
Mark 1:29-39

Body and Soul

There was a church located in a small, southern mill town. Whenever the Pastor's granddaughter, a 2nd grader named Dana, visited her grandpa, she was frightened by the mill's siren, that loud signal that sounded every day at noon.

In order to soothe the girl, Dana's preacher grandpa told her that it had been installed years ago to let factory workers know it was time to go home for lunch. He suggested that whenever she heard that loud, shrill noise, she should stand up and yell out the window:

"Go home and get your lunch!"

It worked! The next time Dana heard the siren, she ran to the window and yelled, "Go home and get your lunch!"

Sunday morning, at the 11:00 service, Dana's grandpa's sermon went long. He was still preaching when the noon siren went off. (You can see this coming, can't you?) Right on cue, Dana stood up on her seat on the second row, turned to the congregation, and yelled,

"Go home and get your lunch!"

And they did.¹

Now don't get any ideas! It's not time for lunch, and the Super bowl doesn't start until 6PM. I do wonder, though, if Jesus and his disciples didn't want to say something like that to the crowd at Sabbath worship in the synagogue. Last week we read about Jesus' sermon – what happened when he was preaching that day and “a man with an unclean spirit” stood up and began shouting at him. Jesus reached out his hand and healed the man, and all the people in the synagogue were amazed at his authority.



"Black Eagle Soars" by Rick Keely

*To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To the one whole voice that is you.
And know that there is more
That you can't see, can't hear
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River: Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness on all things.
Breath in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die within a
True circle of motion.
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us
We pray that it will be done
In beauty
In beauty.
"Eagle Poem" by Joy Harjo*

He must have been exhausted when it was all over, but the action didn't stop; it didn't even slow down. Mark says that from there they went immediately to Simon and Andrew's house where they encounter another kind of crippling illness. Listen to Mark, chapter 1, beginning at verse 29.

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

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And 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.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He 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." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together:

Amazing God, we have come today because we long to meet you. We want to see you more clearly. Give us the patience to wait, wait for you, wait for you to reveal your power and love. Allow us to rearrange our expectations of what it means to follow you. Make us more like Jesus, day by day. Amen.

The gospel of Mark comes at you fast. The pace of it is breathless. The action is intense. There's a constant feeling of urgency. Mark uses 33 verbs in these 10 short verses.ⁱⁱ Mark's favorite adverb is "immediately;" he constantly uses phrases like, "Just then," "As soon as" and "at once." Not only has Jesus been moving quickly from location to location – teaching and healing and casting out demons, but his notoriety is also growing rapidly. People are constantly crowding around him. In Capernaum the whole city crowded around Andrew and Simon Peter's door, bringing their sick loved ones. It got so bad that he had to sneak off in the middle of the night to a deserted place just to get some prayer time.

Just to keep body and soul together.

Simon Peter and the others realized he'd gone and sent out a search party. Actually the text says, "They hunted him down." When they found him they announced frantically, "Everyone is looking for you" which is code for "Everyone wants something from you." Have you ever felt like that? Of course you have. We all have.

Someone gave me this cartoon. It reminds me of something I read from Martin Luther, the great church reformer. Luther was once asked about his plans for the following day. He answered, "I have work and work, from early until late. In fact, I have so much to do tomorrow that I can't possibly accomplish it all on less than three hours spent in prayer."



"Oh, good . . . you're not busy."

Jesus knew the power of quiet time in a lonely place. I like mine early in the morning, with a cup of coffee, watching the sunrise with some scripture and prayer. Not everyone is a morning person. Maybe your quiet place is in the car between appointments with the phone turned off, or out on the Bay with a warm breeze at your back, or on a run or walk beneath the starry night sky. As the song says, "There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God." Jesus valued quiet time. Who are we to say we don't? Quiet time is essential for keeping body and soul together.

If time and money were no object, I think I'd spend my time alone with God watching the sunrise every morning on a mountain peak, after a three-mile hike in the Blue Ridge, or since we're dreaming let's just make it the Rockies, the lofty San Juans, maybe Ouray. But let's be real. I wouldn't last two weeks up there alone. I'd miss you too much! I'd miss my life.

Jesus' disciples came to retrieve him from his quiet place because life was pressing in on all of them. You know about that. If you're fortunate enough to have a church family, friends, and loved ones, if you are blessed with the responsibility of a job or a house, then you know. The needs are constant. Sometimes those needs sound a lot like demands.

Quaker writer, Parker Palmer, is one of my favorites. In his book *The Active Life* Palmer points out that when you are a caring and compassionate person, a person who truly tries to model your life after Jesus', then you are going to face a lot of pressure, and tough choices. You will be called upon to care and serve as Jesus was. You cannot do everything; you have to decide what is best and discern from many different options what will nurture your own spiritual health and wellbeing, and that of your family, and the world around you. Palmer's book is a call for balance and perspective.

He urges us to try to determine if all the frantic activity that we cram into our lives is actually accomplishing anything. Ask yourself: Does what I am doing have meaning? Will it help me, or someone else, become more spiritually healthy and whole?

I love the story that the wonderful storyteller Fred Craddock used to tell about the time he visited the home of one of his former students. After a great dinner, the young parents excused themselves and hustled the kids off to bed, leaving Fred in the living room with the family dog--a large, sleek greyhound.

Earlier in the evening Fred had seen the kids rolling around on the floor playing with the greyhound.

“That’s a full-blooded greyhound there,” the father of the kids had told Fred. “He once raced professionally in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog with the kids.”

So there was Fred sitting there alone with this beautiful dog, when the dog turned to Fred and asked, “This your first time in Connecticut?”

“No,” Fred answered. “I went to school up here a long time ago.”

“Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami,” said the greyhound.

“Oh, yeah, you retired?” Fred asked.

“No,” said the greyhound, “is that what they told you? No, no, I didn’t retire. I spent 10 years as a professional, racing greyhound. That means 10 years of running around that track day after day, chasing that rabbit. Well, one day, I got up close; I got a good, close-up look at the rabbit. And you know what? It was fake! I had spent my whole life running, running, running, and all that time what I was chasing wasn’t even real!”

“So no, I didn’t retire,” said the greyhound. “I didn’t retire; I quit!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Dogs need meaning in their lives like everyone else, I guess. Choose what will nurture your own spiritual health and wellbeing and those around you.

Take football, for example. How many hours did I spent this season watching my beloved Georgia Bulldogs soar to the top spot only to witness their crushing defeat in the last second of the National Championship? This did not make me spiritually whole. Pastors can get caught up in all this football fever same as anyone. A pastor friend emailed me this week to make me aware that Eagles are mentioned in the Bible no less than 33 times, including our Old Testament reading for today. There are, she noted, zero Biblical references to Patriots. Of course, I immediately forwarded this key theological point to Nick Cheek, former Associate Pastor at Woods, and a HUGE Patriots fan. Pastors can get caught up in all this.

One pastor, in one church, when the time came for the offering, took a coin, flipped it into the air, studied it as it landed, then, in typical referee fashion announced:

“The ushers will receive!”

I do not know if this helped that church to receive a larger offering or not, but I know that giving was the immediate response of one person Jesus healed in today’s story – Simon Peter’s mother-in-law.

Listen to it again,

They entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Does it strike you as odd that as soon as she was healed, this poor woman was up and in the kitchen serving the men? Shouldn’t she have been propped up in bed, sipping ginger ale and binge watching *The Crown*? Instead ... she jumped up out of her sick bed and immediately began to serve Jesus and his friends. What’s up with that?

The surprise answer to those questions lies in the words themselves. When Jesus took her by the hand and “lifted her up,” the Greek word that Mark uses is, *egeiro* (ee-GAR-oh). This is the same word that he uses to describe Jesus’ own resurrection in chapter 13. Jesus “raised her up” in the same way God raised Jesus up from the tomb on Easter morning!

Simon’s mother-in-law has more than simply recovered from her fever, she is raised! She actually becomes the first deacon. Immediately she begins to serve them, the verb is *diakoneo* (dee-ah-con-AA-oh), she began to deac. In the same way the angels served Jesus in the wilderness^{iv} Simon’s mother-in-law becomes “a disciple who quietly demonstrates the high honor of service for those who follow Jesus.”^v

And like all Jesus’ disciples before and since, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was busy. That is the fact of it. When you are a caring and compassionate person, life comes at you fast. It doesn’t matter what you are doing to minister in Christ’s name, whether you are caring for the sick and lonely as our modern deacons do, or working to raise up children and youth in the faith as our young families do -- with a lot of help from the congregation; whether you have ever been seriously ill or not, please know that we all have access to this power. In Jesus Christ, in our efforts to serve him faithfully, we too are raised to a life of meaning and power.^{vi}

Last Sunday I told the children that all of us who are part of Jesus’ church are entrusted with the same power Jesus had to heal and to free people. We have his superpowers. Heather Tober, their Sunday school teacher said they were pretty excited about that. She had to remind them that the superpowers he gave us only work when we come together, when we combine our efforts. Obviously we can’t do everything he did all by ourselves, but when we work together, we are unstoppable. We can heal, we can free, we can serve, serve in his name.

A better way to put it might be to recall the words of Isaiah. The great prophet calls us to patience, to persevere in prayer. Renew your strength, Isaiah says. Commit your life to service. Do what spiritually strengthens, heals and builds up. For,

*God gives power to the faint,
And strengthens the powerless.
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.*

Amen? Amen!

ⁱ Deborah Ford, with Edie Hand, *The Grits Guide to Life*, Plume, 2003, 172.

ⁱⁱ It was my dear friend Agnes Norfleet who counted the verbs. I am grateful for her sermon, “What Jesus Heals” preached at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church on February 8, 2015 which inspired this one.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, *Stories*, Michael Graves and Richard Ward, editors, Chalice Press, 2001, 106-7.

^{iv} Mark 1:13

^v Gary Charles, *Feasting on the Word*, 335, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 335.

^{vi} Norfleet, op. cit.