

"Stepping Forward in Ministry"

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 24:1-6

New Testament Lesson – Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

"We are in a rush," says science writer James Gleick. "A compression of time characterizes ... life" Gleick gives a couple of examples: the "door-close button" on elevators, routinely pushed by Type-A people who can't wait the 4 or 5 seconds it takes for the door to close on it's own – One thousands one, One thousands two, One thousands three, One thousands four, One thousands five –

And how about the TV remote control, which leads us to hours of frantic channel surfing. But does all this hurrying gain us anything? Gleick cites several common time-consuming irritants, suggesting that the answer is "Not much." Not much is gained. The phone, supposedly a saver of time, is the source of some insufferable delays, notably when you're on hold. And before you even get on hold, you must follow what seems like a 20-minutes string of instructions and choices to "push or say 1," and before long, you find yourself screaming into the phone: "Representative!" or "Help!" At least that's what happens at our house.

What can those of us who are hurried and anxious do about all this? At least, says Gleick, "recognize that neither technology nor efficiency can acquire more time for you, because time is not a thing you have lost It is what you live in. You can drift or you can swim, and either way it will carry you along."¹

The apostles found themselves swimming against the tides of ministry. Mark reports that they were so successful while sharing Jesus' ministry of healing and restoration that they had no time for leisure, not even to eat. No matter how many people they helped on behalf of Jesus or how much progress they made, the demands on their time were never-ending. So the apostles go "away in a boat to a deserted place by themselves" and "many (people see) them going and recognize them, and ... (hurry) there on foot from all the towns and (arrive) ahead of them."

Did you notice that it's not Jesus who they recognize and follow? It's the apostles and disciples. They crowd around the disciples because of what they did in Jesus' name. We are indeed ambassadors of Christ, and apparently ***ministering on Jesus' behalf is enough to attract great crowds.***

So where are the great crowds flocking to First Presbyterian Church? They're coming, slowly, as visitors and new members continue to value the ministry that we offer them, as well as their chance to minister alongside

¹ Based on writing in *Scientific American*, www.amazon.com book reviews.

us. And over time, with God's help, this community of faith will grow both spiritually and in number, just like what happened with the earliest disciples. And just as it was for those disciples, we sometimes find ourselves feeling like we have no time for rest. We've all felt that way, haven't we? Not even having time to eat?

Even with Jesus – maybe especially in ministry alongside Jesus – at least the type of rest we think of. But Jesus' rest is not what we tend to think of as rest. Notice that every time the crowd needs something, Jesus finds a way to provide it whether he's at work or at rest. Remember the Feeding of the 5,000, earlier in Mark, when Jesus was up on the hill with all those hungry people? He finds a way to feed them, saying to the apostles, "You give them something to eat. ... And all eat and were filled." It was that simple; and it didn't take that much work, with everyone pitching in and trusting in Jesus. Or how about in our reading for today where Mark says the people "rushed about the whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard (Jesus) was. ... And they begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed." It was that simple; and it didn't take that much work.

What it took both times was Jesus and the apostles ***doing ministry in the midst of life*** –not letting themselves get sidetracked by distractions, or overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks at hand, or discouraged by too few resources amid too much need.

As I thought about this week, I recalled a time in my life when I felt completely overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks at hand. This was before I became a pastor. I was working for a company that provides workshops and seminars to help people exceed their expectations in life. And the neat thing was, you didn't just work to put on the workshops and seminars, but rather working at this company was itself a type of workshop, for the employees and for their personal development. The only way to be successful in your job was to exceed your own expectations, and to inspire other people with the idea that together we can move mountains. And in that way, we were able to actually help other learn to exceed their expectations in life, as we learned to go above and beyond in serving others. As followers of Christ, we can set aside the stress of being overwhelmed and having tight schedules in order to move forward anyway, and thus make great progress toward our goals – just by sliding whatever work there is to do into the middle of our stressful, overwhelming, busy lives.

In his book "Finding Faith That Makes Sense", R. Scott Colglazier reminds us of the Buddhist expression "Chop wood; carry water," which is a way of saying that we can serve God (or minister to other people) in the smallest, most ordinary activities of the day.

What daily tasks of yours correspond to a "chop wood; carry water" way of doing ministry? Can you minister to others while encountering a tense confrontation between coworkers? Can you minister to others while answering the same question for the 10th time in a class full of fifth graders?

Can you minister to others while attempting to prepare dinner, talk on the phone, keep the baby from slamming fingers in the door, while you supervise a homework session? Can you minister to others while logged on to the Internet or going at it with your gaming controls? When we really put our minds to it— set our hearts for ministry – we find that we, just like the apostles, can rise to the challenge; we can meet the needs of others wherever and whenever they arise. So what gets in our way?

John Burns, an online contributor, hints at what might get in the way of serving and attracting more people in ministry. "It's because we're overworked," he says. "The population of this country is 237 million: (outdated figures, but go with me here). 104 million are retired. (His words, not mine: retired people do a lot of work in this country). That leaves 133 million to do the work of the entire nation. But he goes on: There are 85 million in school, which leaves 48 million to do the work. Of this, there are 29 million employed by the federal government. This leaves 19 million to do the rest of the work. Four million are in the armed forces, which leaves 15 million to do the work. Take from that total the 14,800,000 people who work for state and city government, and that leaves 200,000 to do the rest of the work. There are 188,000 (people who are) ill and in hospitals, so that leaves 12,000 to do the work. Now, "say Burns:" there are 11,998 people in prisons. That leaves just two people to do the work. You and me. And you're sitting there listening to this e-mail." The biggest struggle for a community of faith isn't not having enough members to meet the needs before us, but rather not having enough needs to attract the members who would meet them. Let me say that again. It's not that churches don't have enough members to meet the needs of their communities, but rather many churches fail to stretch themselves in ministry, and thus they miss out on attracting the people who would like an opportunity to give of themselves to others.

If the message we were to send out into this community and into our neighborhoods and families and among our friends was that we've got so much work to do on Jesus' behalf that we just can't keep up, well, just watch the people flock to serve along side us. But first, we must create the need. We've got so many people wanting to stay connected at First Church that we can't train enough volunteers to run our video camera to broadcast our worship service online. We've got so many people who want the Sew and Sow quits for orphaned children and the dresses for little girls in Africa that we just can't sew fast enough. We've got so many students who need a backpack full of food to carry them through on weekends that we can't keep up with it. We've got so many children and young people coming for Sunday school that we can't find enough volunteers to help lead their Bible lessons. We've got so many Bible studies and fellowship groups scheduled we can't find people to facilitate them all. Is any of this true? Some of it is. And where it's not true, it's only because we haven't yet stepped out in faith in meeting the needs of a few, knowing that in doing so, we will attract the many who are ready to give of their time or receive of our ministry. When the crowds pushed in on the disciples, Jesus stepped in to

lead them and minister to them, teaching them many things and healing those who were sick. Part of being *a community of faith* means *stepping forward in ministry wherever we can*.

As a congregation, we do a good job of meeting the needs of this church, its members and friends, and the people in this community and around the world we've dedicated ourselves to serving. And for some of us, there is need for a rest from your labors. For others, we're looking for where we might serve even more. And for those in between, it's a matter of discovering that there is a need we could meet, even amid the stress and overwhelm and time-crunch of our lives – a need that if met, would help us to exceed our expectations in life, while at the same time, being a blessing in the lives of others.

As we enter into another program year at First Presbyterian Church; as you enter into another school year; or if you're working, the next phase of your job or career; as we begin to set goals for this fall, let us all think anew about how God might use you for ministry – in this church, among your family members and friends, and out in the community, a community that needs the restoration and provision made possible only through Christ's vision and with God's help. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Lord, we live in tension. We feel you calling us away into the quiet, sacred, holy and lonely spaces, and we also feel the heat and the crush of the urgent. There are needs all around, pressing us for answers, pushing us for help and pulling at us for our time and attention. And yet we cannot fully engage the needs without the perspective that only you can bring. Grant us grace, Lord, to know when to retreat and when to engage. Give us ears to hear you in the quiet and eyes to see you through the haze of urgency. Too often we meander aimlessly to do "good works" in your name irrespective of your wishes, your desires and your kingdom plans. Draw us back to the secret place beneath the shadow of your wings, where you reveal your truth before those who become still and call upon your holy name. And where we might serve in your name – in the name of Jesus the Christ – inspire us, lead us and equip us to be a blessing to others. Stretch us beyond our limits to help meet the needs of those who go hungry or without basic life necessities, bring us to the still, small places of this world to comfort the lonely and the grieving, send us out to do miracles in your name. For it is in your name that we pray, and using the words that you taught, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.