

**FIRST THINGS**  
**Text: Mark 1: 29-39**  
February 4, 2024

My husband Sean was sad this morning. There's no football game today. Even worse, next Sunday is Super Bowl. Which marks the end of the season. Oh NO! What will he do with all the time on Monday, Thursday, and Sunday nights now? I do know that next Sunday is Super Bowl 58. I do know the 49ers are competing against the Chiefs. That's about the extent of my knowledge. Today, though, I'd like begin with a story from a completely different sport.

If you're a UCLA basketball fan, you know the name John Wooden. He was one of that team's legendary coaches. In 2006 at the age of 96 Wooden was inducted into the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame. Wooden led his teams to win in basketball; he also taught them about life. He shared his faith and values with them as well as his skill. Among his famous quotes are these: "*Be quick, but don't hurry.*" "*Don't let what you can't do interfere with what you can do.*" "*If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?*" "*Never mistake activity for achievement.*" "Failure to prepare is preparing to fail".

Wooden is especially known for one lesson he taught his teams year after year, game after game. That lesson was the proper way to put on their socks and shoes. Wooden discovered that players often put on their socks and shoes without thinking. They'd do it in a hurry. The socks would rub against their toes during the game causing blisters. It interfered with their ability to play their best. Wooden wanted their first focus to be on the game, not their hurting feet. He didn't want them distracted. He had them smooth out the wrinkles and put the socks on straight. He made them take time to do it carefully and right. It was such a simple thing. What he had them put first made all the difference.

Jesus knew about putting "*first things first*". He knew the difference between what's important and what's essential. He knew how to stay centered and grounded. If we want to faithfully follow him, if we truly want to be a Church that changes lives, those are lessons we need to learn also.

Our text is from Mark. Jesus is teaching and traveling through Galilee. He comes to the house of Simon Peter and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law is ill. Jesus heals her. By sundown the word has spread. Other persons are brought to him. They're sick in body, mind and spirit. Jesus heals many of them.

*In the morning while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” Jesus 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.”*

Simon tells Jesus. “*Everyone is searching for you*”. Jesus, you’re a success. Everyone wants you. Jesus replies, “*Let’s leave.*” “*Let’s go somewhere else.*” It seems a strange response. What can we learn from it?

Simon sees the many persons who’ve come to Jesus. He believes in Jesus. He knows what Jesus can do. He wants him to keep doing it. Jesus also sees the crowd. He knows what they want. They’re looking for more miracles. They want him to fix things and make them right. He also knows what they really need.

Jesus was clear about his purpose. He was sent to proclaim good news and invite persons to life in God’s kingdom. “*Let us go to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do.*” It’s not just about doing good things, Simon. It’s about fulfilling God’s will. It’s about knowing and doing what matters most.

That’s the clue to understanding this passage. Do we know what matters most? Do we understand what to put first? Are we clear about God’s purpose for ourselves? For our Church? We can’t change lives unless we let God change us. We can’t make a difference in the world without letting God make us different.

Michael Lindvall in a sermon on this passage says it shows us Jesus’ three sources of strength. The first source is **vertical**. It’s found in Jesus’ relationship with God. Jesus knows who he is and to whom he belongs. He remembers what that identity means. It shapes his choices. His priority is to do God’s will. “*What does God want?*” That’s his first question. As we live into our Visions, it also needs to be ours.

Jesus’ second source of strength Lindvall says is **horizontal**. It’s found in his relationships with others. Jesus doesn’t try to do it alone. He depends on God. He knows his need for others. He chooses companions and partners for his ministry. He looks for those who will walk beside him and work with him. He uses their gifts to Build the kingdom. With whom can we partner? With whom can we build bridges for a stronger witness and ministry?

Jesus' third source of strength is **internal**. It's found in solitude. Jesus gives himself permission to step back and step away. He makes (not takes—**makes**) time to pray. He nurtures the spirit of God within him so that he can live outward from that center. How are we grounding ourselves for our ministry? Where do we find our center? How do we nurture and give space for God's spirit to work within us?

Lindvall concludes: "*Anything that matters demands attention. Anything that matters ultimately demands ultimate attention—devotion. If something matters, you devote yourself to it.*"

In the beginning of this text Jesus frees Simon's mother-in-law from illness. He frees crowds of people from disease and possession as well. He frees us also. He frees us from those things which rob us of life—things like fear, regret, guilt, despair, sin and self-centeredness. He frees us from—he also frees us **for**—he frees us for service, for love, for works of justice, mercy, healing and hope. He sets us free to live into our God-given identity and our calling as children of God.

Our United Methodist Book of Discipline puts it this way: "*The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility...*" We are the church. We're called to be and bring the Church to others and to the world. We're the community of individuals to whom God has entrusted the mission of the Church. Our first calling is to live always and everywhere as disciples of Jesus Christ. That calling came with our baptism. It's not optional and it's a ministry that doesn't end.

Do we always get it right? No. Do we sometimes miss opportunities or get stuck in the status quo? Yes. Do we take all the risks we should? No. Are we seeking new ways, new visions, new directions to be faithful. Yes and Yes and Yes.

My dad was an aerospace engineer. He'd often bring my mom stories to use as sermon illustrations. "*This would be a good sermon illustration*", he'd say. "*You could preach this.*" I heard his voice in my head while writing this week. It's a good parable for today's truths.

*Global Hawk was a \$45 million drone aircraft being developed by the Air Force. It had a 116-foot wingspan and could fly for more than a day. It scans terrain in minute detail and relays its data to ground stations as far as 3,000 miles away.*

*In a test some years ago, a “Hawk” on a simulated mission rolled onto its back at 400 mph, dove and smashed into the California desert. An investigation revealed that the plane literally committed “suicide”. It shut down its engine, erased classified computer data and set its flaps for a crash spiral.*

*Why? It seems that more than 100 miles away, a team of Air Force personnel was testing another Hawk’s “flight termination” command. The first Hawk intercepted that command and responded to it. A \$45 million aircraft destroyed itself on the desert floor because it listened to the wrong voice.*

To whose voice are we listening? Who are we putting first? How will we change lives and make a difference? We are the Church. Let us be and bring God’s love and grace to others. Let us be a people who put God first. Make it so. Amen.