

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 2/5/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Mark 1:29-39

In a sermon last spring, I mentioned that for a period of three months in 2004, I had worked with a personal coach. This is not the same thing as a personal trainer. The person with whom I contracted to be my coach - for an initial face-to-face conversation, and then for weekly, 45-minute telephone calls - was a professional who would help me gain some clarity about the quality, the balance, and direction of my life in general, and some vocational issues in particular. I wanted guidance from someone who had no emotional investment in either the process or the outcome, in answering questions for myself such as: "Am I using my gifts effectively? Am I focusing my energies on what's life-giving for me, or does much of what I do leave me feeling drained? What's standing in the way of my taking better care of myself physically? What might be the next right step in my vocational life? Where do I see myself, personally and professionally, five years from now?"

One of the suggestions that my coach made during our work together that's been the most helpful was for me to write a mission statement for myself. It was supposed to be specific enough so that it could be held as a standard against which to measure decisions about the allocation of my time, energy, and resources; yet general enough to apply to my work, my family, and all other aspects of my life. The mission statement was intended to articulate what I believe my life is to be about. In a spiritual context, one's mission statement might be more accurately understood as one's calling.

I wonder whether Jesus re-visited his own mission statement when he went out to a deserted place to pray, as described in today's story from the gospel of Mark. Jesus was in Capernaum, where, earlier in the day, he had taught those gathered at the synagogue there, and then healed a man who was being "tormented" by what was then known as an "unclean spirit." Those who were present were amazed at what Jesus was able to do, and his fame began to spread.

After entering the home of Simon, one of his newly-called disciples, Jesus had the opportunity to heal Simon's mother-in-law, who was in bed with a fever. I imagine that those in the household who witnessed it were just as amazed as had been those at the synagogue, and couldn't wait to tell everyone they knew. So when the sun set and the Sabbath was over, people flocked to this house where Jesus was staying. The writer clearly wants to stress the overwhelming response to Jesus' ability to heal with the use of such phrases as "they brought to him all who were sick or were possessed with demons," and "the whole city gathered around the door."

The crowds must have been re-convening very early the next morning. Jesus had sought out some solitude to rest in the presence of God while it was still dark, and even then, the text says that Simon and the others hunted for him. They didn't just look for him; they hunted for him - with the message, "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus' ministry was having a major impact. People were responding enthusiastically. The new disciples were

charged up. It would seem that the most natural and logical thing for Jesus to do would be more of the same – to stay right there in Capernaum, to heal those who were coming to him. People were responding positively. He was successful. And wasn't that the point?

But Jesus says “no.” He responds to his disciples', and the crowds', expectations that he would stay and meet the very real needs of those clamoring for his attention with these words: “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.” Jesus doesn't give in to what makes the most sense to everyone around him. He's taken time apart from that pressure to become centered in the love and presence of God. And in that quiet, sacred time and space apart, it may be that he re-visited his own mission statement, and reclaimed his own calling. I wonder if the time alone with God might have given him the wisdom he needed to take the next step in his ministry, in order to fully live out his calling.

Jesus' calling was to proclaim the good news of God – the good news that the kingdom of God had come near. In the person of Jesus, the love, the power, and the presence of God were fully and perfectly revealed. Jesus' calling included, but wasn't limited to, healing. Jesus' calling included, but wasn't limited to, Capernaum. He clearly was, and would have continued to be, successful in that particular ministry in Capernaum. But it wouldn't have been what his life, ultimately, was intended to be. Had he limited himself to a healing ministry in Capernaum, imagine the number of people elsewhere who wouldn't have been touched by his healing love. Had he not manifested among all people the healing power of God as well as the forgiveness, mercy, and inclusion of the marginalized that's the very essence of God, and had he not taught about all of that to which his life witnessed, then those who came into contact with him would have missed the big picture. Jesus needed to be clear about who he was and what he was about, in order for his calling to be lived out fully and abundantly.

We, also, need to be clear about who we are and what we're about, so that our calling might be lived out fully and abundantly. How hard it is for any of us to walk away from what most people would consider success in order to pursue the God-given desire of our heart. How difficult it is for any of us not to become sidetracked when we're being flattered and recognized and appreciated for what we do. Not that there's anything inherently wrong with success, or recognition, or appreciation! But these things can get in the way of identifying or following our true calling.

What is it that each of us is to be about in this life? What's our mission statement? At the end of our days, what do we want to be able to say about how we spent our time, our energy, our resources? What might be a sentence or two that would summarize for us a life well and faithfully lived, using our God-given gifts and tapping into our God-given passion? What's holding us back from living that out?

Frederick Buechner has written that our true calling is where our deepest gladness and the world's greatest hunger meet. May we thoughtfully and prayerfully search our hearts to identify what our deepest gladness really is. May we open our eyes to the many and

varied forms of hunger that are all around us. And may we have the clarity and the courage, through the power of Christ, to live our lives, faithfully and intentionally, at that very place. Amen.