

Title: Looking for Jesus

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you sent your son as a model for ministry, a living example for us to follow; strengthen us through your Holy Spirit to continue the work of him through whom we pray, Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The story is told of a little boy and his father. They were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy looked at the stone and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?"

The father thought for a moment and said, "I think that if you use all your strength, you can do it."

That was all the little boy needed. He ran over to the rock and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard did he try that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn't move - not an inch, not half an inch.

After a while, the little boy sat down on the ground. His face had fallen. His whole body seemed to be just a lump there on the earth. "You were wrong," he told his dad. "I can't do it."

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy's shoulder. "You can do it," he said. "You just didn't use all your strength. You didn't ask me to help." (Ladies, it's a male thing.)

The world in which we live tells us that it is all up to us. It tells us that we have to be strong and independent. It tells us we can't and shouldn't count on anyone or anything else. This partially explains why Ayn Rand was an atheist. And yet, what faith tells us and what Jews and Christians have known forever is that we have a ready resource in God, strength for those who ask.

Jesus is a source of strength for us. We are reminded when we read and hear the stories about Jesus from the gospels. Before beginning his Galilean ministry, Jesus' actions of healing, exorcism, and prayer became part of the

pattern of his work with others. Our response is one of service and searching.

In our gospel reading, it is Saturday. Jesus is in his new hometown, the base for his ministry, Capernaum. After synagogue, Jesus and his four disciples go to Peter and Andrew's house. There are presumably other household members telling Jesus about Peter's mother-in-law's illness. Jesus' response is to heal her.

Pretty simple story. Jesus heals again. Note that it is still the Sabbath and it is illegal for Jesus to work, including a healing. A little thing about breaking a commandment from the Law of Moses doesn't stop him. There is a human need and religious laws sometimes get in the way of meeting human needs. Maybe a less than simple story.

Though never made explicit, Peter seems to be married. He has a mother-in-law, who is never named. There is never a mention of his wife. Presumably, there are children. There are other household members whom we do not know. It is unclear if Andrew is married, but probably not as he would likely live apart from Peter if he was married.

What happens next is open to much comment. Jesus takes Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and she begins to serve them. So Peter's mother-in-law also violates the law and works on the Sabbath. Jesus' anarchy is spreading to others. Feminists have used this sentence to further complain about misogyny in the Bible. But is it really that?

Might it be that out of gratitude for being healed, she responded by serving them? And what is meant by the word translated as "serve?" The Greek word, *diakoneo*, is as broad as our word serve. It means to be a table waiter. It means to render assistance. It means to minister to someone. It may also mean to handle someone's finances. But the context here is probably serving food and drink. To have her do this, immediately after being healed, must be out of profound gratitude for her healing.

It is interesting that the word we translate as serve is also the root word for an order of ordained ministry, a deacon. A deacon is one who serves. The deacon serves the church and the deacon serves the world. The first deacons, in the Book of Acts, administered the distribution of food to widows.

In Capernaum on that day, like a house on Super Bowl Sunday, there is much eating and drinking. Then the sun goes down and it is Sunday. The Sabbath is over. Word about Jesus exorcising the demon from the man at the synagogue has gotten out. There is pent up demand to get sick people to Jesus and do it soon. The darkness does not deter them. There are no street lights, let alone electricity in Capernaum. The need is so great that they can't wait for daylight.

The sick and the possessed and their friends and loved ones crowded around Peter's door. It seemed that everyone in Capernaum was there. Now, Capernaum was not a big town. In ancient times, all towns were really small. Only a few cities were really big. Estimates of the population were from a few hundred to under a thousand. Still, a sizable crowd was at the door.

Peter was probably not annoyed with the crowd at his door. Peter had the miracle-worker staying at his house. Peter was now an important person in Capernaum. The whole town is coming to *his* house. Peter may have acted as a gate-keeper, deciding who gets in and who does not – a powerful position. Peter and the others are still not clued in to why Jesus is really there.

We are told that Jesus healed many, which implies he didn't heal all of them. We are not told about the exceptions. Jesus cast out many demons and prevented them from speaking. It seems that demons were obsessed with telling the truth and Jesus didn't want them telling everyone who Jesus really is. Especially in Mark, Jesus is like Clark Kent. He has a secret identity. Jesus is more than he seems, which is already pretty impressive.

Needless to say, Jesus had an exhausting night. Before sunrise, when it was still really, really dark, Jesus leaves the house. He finds a place where no one is. It is deserted. There are a lot of open spaces around the Sea of Galilee. It is there, away from people, that Jesus prays. Mark is telling us that 1) Jesus needs times alone, and 2) prayer is an important part of Jesus' life.

A crisis may have necessitated Jesus' need to pray. The people see him as a miracle-worker and do not seem to have absorbed his teachings. Several centuries earlier, Isaiah, speaking for God, also bewails the ignorance of the

people about who and what God is. In today's Old Testament reading, Isaiah sets them straight, if they listened.

Meanwhile back at Peter's house, they wake up and find Jesus is gone. They seem to panic. It is as though they lost something very precious and they must find it. And indeed they are looking for something very precious. It is not a ring of power. It is a person of power. They may have also thought that their ticket to power was gone.

When found, they seem to scold Jesus like he was a lost child. The words are similar to Mary's when they find the boy Jesus at the temple in Luke's gospel. Jesus ignores the searchers' concern and instead gives them work to do. Jesus' ministry is not going to be limited to Capernaum. Jesus tells them that they are going to the towns around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus came to proclaim the good news and that means a road trip.

Jesus goes to the synagogues in the region's towns and he cast out many demons. The place seems to be severely haunted. Jesus is going to make the region normal, maybe more than normal. But Jesus might be a bit concerned here. The people seem to be interested in Jesus because he can heal and cast out demons. They do not seem to be interested in Jesus' message. Jesus is much more than a miracle worker. The irony is that Jesus is preventing the demons from letting everyone know who he really is.

Jesus and his disciples are to go to the other towns. Jesus can't do it alone. He needs help. And his disciples are to help proclaiming Jesus' message. We, too, can't stand around. Like Jesus, we are to spread hope and relief to others. We, too, are to help Jesus in spreading his message to others. How can we do this? We can do this with the help of others and we can pray. Pray for the strength and joy that comes from God to do ministry, to do *diakoneo*, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name.

Text: **Mark 1:29–39** (NRSV)

²⁹ As soon as theyⁿ left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

ⁿ Other ancient authorities read *he*

³² That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ 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.

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ 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.” ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:29–39). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.