

**“Mentors, Guides and Jesus”**  
**Mark 1:29-39**  
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**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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As most of you know, I attended a couple of conferences in Florida last week. It was good to get away to a warmer place, though the locals kept apologizing for how cold it was – with highs only in the 60’s and 70’s – and both conferences were wonderful. At the first conference, several speakers addressed the role of mentors.

*New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott talked about the film *The Last Jedi* in which Luke Skywalker is a mentor to Rey. Poet Billy Collins and composer Gustavo Santaolalla talked about their personal mentors. And NPR’s Krista Tippett talked about the kind of mentors she finds most helpful - mentors who have challenges, struggles with darkness. These mentors are more like us, she said, they are more approachable, and thus in many ways more helpful.

Many other themes were explored and the other conference at Stetson University was wonderful too, but I found the focus on mentors instructive. We all have them – personal mentors, vocational mentors, spiritual mentors. We can also think of biblical figures who are guides - Moses and Miriam, Peter and Paul – as well as people throughout the history of the church – Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Roger Williams, Mother Teresa. And like Krista Tippett, we prefer guides who are fully human like us, faithful yet flawed, inspiring yet approachable.

And yet, while all of these guides and mentors are helpful, for Christians our primary mentor is Jesus. It may seem like he fails Krista Tippett’s test. He is without sin, according to church tradition, God incarnate, not like us at all. And yet, he is also fully human, according to this same tradition, just like us in many ways. There is much we can learn from him in stories like the one we have read today from Mark 1.

As we join the story, Jesus and the disciples leave the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus has encountered a man with an unclean spirit –

Dr. Day explored that story last week – and they immediately enter the house of Simon and Andrew. If you go to Capernaum today, you can see the remains of a fifth-century synagogue which we think is built on the site of a previous synagogue. It is just across the street from what we believe was the home of Simon Peter, and it was a substantial home.

This tells us Peter was not a common fisherman but a prominent businessman, a natural leader in the community, a disciple with influence and someone who had a lot to leave behind when he chose to follow Jesus. This also explains the presence of Peter's mother-in-law. It is common practice at the time for extended families to live together if possible. Peter's resources make it possible. We might prefer to be poor, depending on how well we get along with our mother-in-law...

Anyway, you get the picture. Jesus and the disciples leave the synagogue and enter Simon and Andrew's house, and Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. They tell Jesus about this and immediately he goes to her, takes her hand and tells her to get up. She does and is healed which is good news for her and them, because Mark says she begins to serve them. Perhaps this seems unfair, oppressive even, but in the new way Jesus is launching service is a holy act.

After this first scene, there are several more scenes in our brief reading. Other sick people and people possessed with demons are brought to Jesus and he heals them. He goes off to pray in the early morning until Simon and the others find him, we'll talk more about this, but the first thing that jumps out at me in this story is how much of Jesus' ministry takes place not as the result of careful planning, but in the natural flow of life, in response to the needs of people he meets.

Jesus knows who he is and what he is called to do and he has a general plan for how he will fulfill his mission, but most of his daily interactions are not planned. He goes about his day, he meets people with needs and he addresses them. He enters Simon's house and Simon's mother-law is sick. So, he heals her. Other sick people are brought to him. So, he heals them. And on and on it goes. Even his parables are told in response to some need, issue or question.

How might our lives and the life of our church change if we were willing to follow Jesus' example? Like him, we need to know who we

are and what we are called to do. Like him, we need a general plan. But like him, we encounter people with all kinds of needs in the natural flow of life. What might happen if we were willing to be more responsive to the needs around us rather than feeling like we have to plan it all out?

Some of the best experiences of life are not planned. In between the two conferences last week, Dana and I had a couple days to rest. The day we rested at Epcot, we had some great experiences that were planned using fast passes for key attractions and eating dinner at the Rose and Crown Pub. But one of the best experiences happened by accident. As we headed to the Rose and Crown, we passed a concert venue where there are usually young artists performing theater music.

We had time, so we stopped, expecting some OK singing, but this was not a normal show. The performers were Alton Fitzgerald White, who played the role of Mufasa in *The Lion King* on Broadway for thirteen years, and Kissy Simmons, who played the role of Nala on Broadway. It was an incredible performance that we just walked into on the way to dinner. Some of the best experiences of life are not planned.

The same can be said of some of the most transformative spiritual experiences we have and some of the most meaningful ministries of the church as well. We do many things in the way of study, prayer and worship to make space for spiritual growth, but sometimes God just comes to us and shakes us into a greater awareness of the Holy. We plan all sorts of significant ministries, but sometimes ministry just happens because of where we are and who is around us.

We plan for the clothing ministry and Toy Joy and many other good things, but in and out of those plans, we are surrounded by people who live, work, play and struggle downtown. They don't fit one demographic. They are rich and poor; from here and all over the world; white, black and brown; of every possibility identity and persuasion; Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and none-ish. But all have needs. How might we respond to those needs in the natural flow of life?

But having said this, another thing we see in the ministry of Jesus is that he recognizes his limits as a human being. He realizes he cannot meet every need. He heals Peter's mother-in-law and many others in

Capernaum. Then, he goes off to pray until Peter finds him. There are others who need Jesus' help. Word travels fast when there is a healer in town. But Jesus has other plans, other places he needs to go, and so he says it is time to move on. He cannot meet every need anywhere he is.

It is a lesson we are wise to learn as individuals and as a church. We cannot meet every need. If Jesus can't do it, we can't do it. The Apostle Paul may say he has become all things for all people, but he has not. He has stretched himself in order to share the Gospel faithfully, to connect with people of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, but he has not become *all* things for *all* people. No one can. We all have limits, but this is a truth most people and churches struggle to acknowledge.

As we were searching for a new pastoral care associate in another setting, one committee member said in an interview with a candidate, "We want to insure with this position that no need ever goes unmet." I cringed. I knew what he meant, but I did not agree with what he said. So, I tried to reframe the statement, saying, "What we are trying to say is that we want to be as faithful as possible, knowing we have limits and trusting in God to take care of what we do not." I did not want that potential staff person to think we expected her to outperform Jesus!

We might keep this in mind as we search for a new minister to help us connect with the downtown community. We want energetic leadership, of course, but we do not expect one person to do it all.

Part of the message here is that none of us can do it all. Even our church as a whole, as part of the larger Body of Christ, cannot meet every need. But another part of the message is that we are all needed in the church. If everyone does his/her part, we can meet more needs.

A story appeared in the news last July about how nine members of a family trapped in a riptide off the coast of Florida were rescued by a human chain formed by 80 people. Roberta Ursrey was enjoying a day at the beach with her family until she noticed her two sons trapped by the riptide. Roberta went after them and was joined by her mother and five other family members, but soon all nine of them were in trouble. Fortunately, a woman on the beach and her husband formed a human chain with 80 people and rescued the family. But it took all of these people working together to accomplish the task.

It usually takes all of us because any one of us has limited ability, time and energy. We learn this from Jesus, our very human mentor.

So, we learn from Jesus the wisdom of responding to needs around us in the natural flow of life and we learn that we cannot meet every need. Then, we learn how important it is to root all of our experience in God. After Jesus heals many people, what does he do? He finds a quiet place to go and pray, to center his life in God. Throughout his ministry he does this. The disciples track him down and interrupt his time with God, but still he fights for this time because he knows how critical it is.

How could we think we could do more on our own than Jesus? We too need to center all that we do in God. Surely we seek guidance for all that we do as individuals and as a church, but we also seek strength, the empowerment of God's Spirit. The prophet Isaiah says that those who wait before the Lord shall renew their strength.

Pastoral care professor Wayne Oates was asked how much time he set aside each day for devotions. He was a busy man, teaching at the seminary and the medical school. People expected a reasonable answer. "Two hours," he said. "How can you take that much time, given all that you do," they asked. "How can I not, given all that I do?" he replied.

I make no claim of being able to follow Wayne Oates with this level of time commitment, but I recognize the wisdom in his thinking. I know how much I need God's strength and wisdom for all I say and do. I know how critical it is to root my life in the Holy, as I am sure you do.

One of my mentors, Old Testament professor Page Kelley, told a story about a Native American in Alaska many years ago who saw his first electric light turned on in a village at a store. He was utterly amazed! So, he bought a lamp, took it home and immediately turned the switch, but no light came on. Electric lights don't work very well unless they are plugged in to a source of electricity which he did not have.

In like manner, Dr. Kelley said, we human beings don't work very well unless we are plugged into the Source of our very being. That's what Jesus is doing before dawn in Capernaum. That's what we need to do if we are to respond faithfully to the needs around us.