

“Finding Balance”

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Ephesians 2: 11-22 Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

The image of citizenship describes the change that happens to Gentiles who become Christians. Through Christ the barriers are broken down and we are welcomed into citizenship in the people of God, that before now, had been only for Israel. The prophets of Israel have become our prophets; the history of Israel has become our history. We are no longer outsiders, but citizens of the Kingdom through Christ. Listen for God’s word to us in this lesson.

Ephesians 2: 11-22

The following selected verses from Mark are not meant to describe one particular event, but rather to portray the nature of Jesus’ ministry generally. We see large crowds of people so needy that they will not leave Jesus or the disciples alone even when they need a break. We see Jesus responding with compassion to their need, putting aside his own need for rest and refreshment. We see how intertwined were Jesus’ teaching and healing; he seems never to have done one without the other. Both rose out of his compassion for the crowd. Both were signs of the Good News that God was changing people’s lives. Both were integral to the ministry he undertook, and passed on to his disciples. Hear God’s word to us through the words of Mark’s gospel.

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

One of the things that caught my attention as I read and reread these two texts is their call to a kind of balance in our lives; a kind of Ying and Yang, or ebb and flow in our lives.

In Ephesians, the balance is within the context of the citizenship of the kingdom and membership in the church. There is a need for both an inclusion in allowing the doors of the church to be open to all those who the Spirit calls into membership; while at the same time, needing to stand for certain principles and values that are intrinsic to its very nature. There is a need for diversity of gender, race, and opinion; and yet a clear understanding of the purpose of the community into which we are called as Christians. There is a need for balance in our corporate lives together.

And in Mark, Jesus shows the disciples and us, the need to balance the need for Sabbath, restorative time with the pull to attend to the needs of others--the need for balance in our doing time and our being time. Given the pace of our lifestyles, this may be the most difficult kind of balance to find.

The reason I feel we need to look at both of these passages today is because I don’t think you can maintain balance for long in either of these spheres until or unless, we strive to attain them in both. I feel our corporate health, as a faith community is dependent on the spiritual health of its members. And vice versa.

We live in a society that is nominally Christian. If you ask people on the street if they believe in God, or even if they're Christian, you will generally get lukewarm affirmation. Gallop and other pollsters do it all the time. People might say that they're protestant or they're catholic; but if you push them, they really don't know what that means. Our stores are filled with the trappings of religion, especially at Christmas and Easter. Our money still retains the hold over wording from early days, "In God we trust." There are churches and synagogues on street corners all across our land, but those faith communities no longer direct the moral and ethical values of our society.

"Being Christian is no longer the normal, natural American thing to do. Our children watch an average of 15 hours of television every week. They are in church a maximum of a couple hours per week. When watching television, they are being bombarded with images of success, of the good life, of the goal of humanity that may be at great variance with how the faith defines these matters. Suddenly the church, and its teaching, witness, worship, and work become important as a way of instilling in us and our young a way to counter to the world's ways."

When I think of the new genre of television shows that are influencing our young people, I shudder. The "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" and "Greed" types pale next to the "Survivor" and "Big Brother" ones. We're sliding down the slipperiest of slippery slopes into total abandonment of anything resembling Christian values. It's so difficult for the church to stand for anything in a culture stands for nothing.

We want our church to grow, to be a strong, healthy beacon for those who want a better way of life—NOT easier, richer, dominant, but better. We want to open our doors to anyone and everyone who wants more out of life than society is currently offering. BUT it cannot be at the expense of who we are and whose we are. It cannot be just because we want the attendance numbers up, but because we're offering something that attracts people in. The more we stand for something good and right and just, the closer we are following God's will and Christ's mission for us, the easier it is for us to find the balance that our church and society needs.

Jesus broke down the walls of division between people because of gender, class, race, orientation, age, and ability. In doing this he never intended for us to throw up our hands into the air and say, "Well then, I guess anything goes." Jesus was saying that it's not about what we look like on the outside—it's not about to whom and where we were born—it's about the kind of life we want to live once we're able to choose. The Church of Jesus Christ, needs to find a balance within its own doors. What goes on here HAS to be different from what goes on out there. What we teach here HAS to be different from what is taught out there. We have to stand for something if we are to be Christ's church—we have to put our money and our actions into fulfilling the words we speak.

The balance we seek inside these walls—is what will aid us in striving to find balance outside these walls. For me, the two are inseparable.

Jesus modeled for us a life of integrity. He was a man who lived his life in such a way that people were drawn to him and his way of life. Jesus calls us to live out that model in our lives as his disciples. We are to live our lives in such a way that others will be drawn to want to follow Jesus, too. Jesus doesn't want us to gather disciples of our own—we're not the focus here—Jesus is. But, we are to live our lives in such a way that people want to know more about him. Finding balance in our personal lives is about making good choices-- it's about doing for ourselves AND others—not excluding either for the other.

Long ago in the hills of Gallilee Jesus and the disciples walked the dusty roads modeling for others a new way to be. Jesus didn't pull the masses out of their daily lives, rather he taught them how to balance their daily lives. He taught them to put God first and then everything else would follow. He taught and healed, but he also rested and retreated. He modeled Sabbath time and the need for time alone with God. He worked and taught long hard hours, but he balanced them with fun times with family and friends, and dedicated time with God. He observed the traditions and practices of his faith. He went to the synagogue and the Temple to pray. He read the sacred scriptures. He knew the value of renewing his Spirit in prayer and reflection.

How can we find balance in our own lives? I think we periodically need to take a moral inventory of ourselves—personally and corporately. People in 12 step programs are asked to do this all the time.

Within the Church, we need to do the same things. How much of our time together is worship, studying, teaching, praying? How much time do we devote to business? Do we balance the time we spend on the organizational structure with the need to be with God and be about God's business? How do we treat one another? Do we exemplify the values of integrity, trust, patience, and forgiveness? Do we as a faith community tithe to missions or does mission money get cut to balance the budget?

The final reason that I feel we cannot separate the need for balance in the two spheres of our lives is that we are not on this journey alone. Jesus didn't tell the disciples to go out and convert people and then set them adrift. Jesus called us into community. And it is in community that the rubber hits the road, so to speak. We could all go off and be very good, very moral hermits living out our lives. It's easy to do good and be good when there's no one else around. But we are called to live in a world that doesn't often do good, with people who don't often want to be good. Beset with crime and immorality, disease and corruption, we don't think that we can do anything. So why not just go with the flow?

Because we are called to greater things than that. We are called by Jesus to be his disciples. We are asked to belong to him and to do what he did while he was with us on earth. Friends, we cannot do those things all by ourselves. We are called into community to strengthen and support one another in our joys and sorrows, in our successes and our failures, in our plenty and when in want.

Living a life of faith is a balancing act—but it is in the balance that we find the life of richness and wholeness that only God can give.

Thanks be to God. Amen.