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*The time that is given to us*  
A sermon on Mark 1:29-39  
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Today's scripture reading picks up where we left off last week. Jesus has called James and John and Simon and Andrew. They go to a town called Capernaum, and on the sabbath they go to the synagogue, where Jesus astounds everyone by teaching with authority and healing a man with an unclean spirit. But the day's not over yet, and today's reading continue the story of a day in the life of Jesus and his disciples at the very beginning of his ministry . . .

Have you ever had to wait in line to get medical care? I remember one of my kids getting sick on a Saturday, and spending what felt like hours at the Urgent Care in a room full of anxious parents and coughing kids as we waited to see the doctor. I know a number of YOU have gone to the emergency room when the hospital was particularly full, and had to wait for half a day or more until a room became available for you. And I've prayed with some of you as you waited days or even weeks to be seen by a specialist that you hoped would have some answers for you.

And I'll never forget the sight of all the people waiting in line in the hot sun at a little clinic in a little village in Kenya—there were several hundred of them. We had to put up a big tent outside to protect people from the sun, because the waiting room and the long, covered porch of the clinic weren't big enough to hold everyone as they waited their turn to be treated. Some of them had walked for 6 or 7 miles, and they came and waited and would not leave, because of the chance to be seen by a real doctor and to receive the care they needed. We had to keep the clinic open for a second full day, because there were just so many people.

In today's story, Jesus has already given us a glimpse of his power and authority by casting an unclean spirit out of a man in the synagogue. The disciples see this and waste no time taking him home to Simon's house, where Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of her fever. She

is so thoroughly healed that she gets up and begins to serve Jesus and his friends, in essence becoming the first deacon. And notice that it is STILL the sabbath day, so she technically shouldn't be serving anybody, but maybe that's just the natural response when Jesus has taken your hand and lifted you up.

Because it IS the sabbath day, the townspeople obediently wait until the sun goes down and the sabbath is over. And then they come. The whole city. Everybody who had anybody who was sick shows up, and waits their turn, and Jesus heals them. Demons, and fevers, and everything in between. Notice that we never hear Jesus judge or shame anybody for being sick or having a demon. He just heals them, with a touch or a word or sometimes both.

[So one easy take-away for us from this story is the affirmation that churches are meant to be communities where healing happens. That includes the obvious things like praying for one another when we're suffering from illnesses and disease, and bringing meals and prayer shawls and helping people get to their appointments, but also the less obvious things, like making sure that any touching that happens among us is healthy, appropriate and respectful, which sometimes means making sure that people who live alone get a hug or a handshake, and sometimes means not touching someone at all, if that is not their thing, and letting that be absolutely fine. Being a healing community also means that the words we speak are words that bless and build up, which doesn't mean we have to be non-stop fountains of flattery for one another, but let's not miss precious opportunities to encourage one another, either.

But back to Jesus and his busy day. You know, I just keep thinking what a fun and joyful night that must have been, with Jesus bringing so much hope and easing so much suffering. Can you picture Jesus, perhaps bending or squatting down to get right next to them, and maybe he looks into their eyes and smiles. Maybe he says a word of blessing, or takes their hand, like he

did with Simon's mother-in-law. It must have been so satisfying to watch the look of pain fade from the person's face, and the color come back to their cheeks, and maybe even stand up, feeling strong and full of energy again. Maybe there were people who had to be carried to Jesus, who were able to walk home that night with their families. Maybe some of them were fathers who had been too sick to work, and now they could support their families again—maybe some of them were mothers who had been too sick to hold their children, and now they could pick them up and carry them again. Wouldn't that have been something, to help so many people.

And after this long day of teaching and healing and casting out demons, we find Jesus rising before the sun is up, and going off alone to pray. When Simon and his friends find him, they say, "Everybody's looking for you!" Or, to say it another way: There's a line outside the clinic, Jesus, and it's time to get back to work.

Now I think Jesus saw this coming, and that's why he had to go someplace where he wouldn't be distracted while he prayed. It would be so easy to stay there in Capernaum, to let the people come to him. To be the guy who eased people's pain, met their needs, and helped them feel better. It would be a pretty good gig, hanging out in Capernaum . . .

Not only that, but whatever Jesus had done the night before, it wasn't enough. There were more sick people waiting, people who hadn't been around the night before, but overnight the word had spread and they were on their way now. Some of them were probably bringing sick children. What's the harm in sticking around a little longer? Think of the compliments and the gratitude, and the loyalty and admiration Jesus would be sure to receive!

But Jesus will not let his well-meaning disciples set his agenda for him. His time of prayer has strengthened him, and reminded him who he is and whose he is. So he says to them,

“Let’s go (turn and point) that way, to the neighboring towns, so I can proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.”

There’s that wonderful quote from one of the Lord of the Rings movies where the hobbit Frodo is on a dangerous journey with little chance of success and a high probability of dying along the way, and he says to the wizard Gandalf, “I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish this need not have happened in my time,” and Gandalf says, “So do all who live to see such times. But that is not given them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

Jesus makes a decision about what to do with the time he is given. He does not let the disciples make it for him. He focuses on his mission of teaching and healing throughout the whole region, not just one town. He knows he is disappointing people by leaving town so soon, but he wisely refuses to let this distract him. He could have stayed in Capernaum for another week, and healed all day long, and people would still be disappointed that he left. Now, Jesus is NOT saying no to healing people—he just knows that his healing ministry is part of something bigger, and he needs to get out there.

Another take-away from this story is the reminder that we, too, get to decide what to do with the time that is given to us. We, too, are called to seek God in prayer, to remember who we are and whose we are, and to listen for God’s direction as we set our priorities. We do well to remember that Jesus couldn’t make everybody happy, and neither can we. We either get really clear on what our mission is and do our best to live that out, or we accept that other people will set our agenda for us, and that’s not a healthy way to live. And this is true whether we are 20 years old and trying to choose a career, or 40 years old and starting a second career, or 30 years old and wondering if it’s time to start a family, 50 years old and deciding on a course of medical

treatment, 70 years old and re-writing your will, or 80 or 90 and choosing our attitude when we can no longer do all the things we used to do.

It is also true for churches. Churches have to decide what to do with the time that is given to them. We go to God in prayer, and get really clear on what we are uniquely gifted and called to do, and do that, and not worry about what all the other churches are doing, and what others think we ought to do. And we don't just do this once, but regularly, because times change and churches change and we have a different set of gifts and needs than we did in the 1800's and the 1950's and even from last year. Of course, the great thing about being Presbyterian is that we elect spiritual leaders called elders to do this together, so it's never the burden of any one individual.

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

If you are here, you have today. And maybe tomorrow, and the day after that and lots of other days after that, or maybe not. Let's each of us prayerfully decide what we will do with this precious gift of the time that is given to us, however small or great it may be. Amen.