

SERMON "KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL"
(Mark 1:29-39 Preached to MPC on February 4th, 2018)

As I read today's story about Jesus healing crowds of people and then going elsewhere, instead of sticking around to make something out of his newfound congregation—I wondered why did Christ leave the scene of great success after making such a powerful and positive impression on these people?

That's what the disciples may have thought also! Jesus came to Capernaum and attended the synagogue and drove out a demon. He went to Simon's house and healed Simon's mother-in-law. The people flocked to him so that he might heal them. He healed lots of people, and the crowd couldn't get enough of him. And then, just as he had them eating out of his hand, he went off to a deserted place to pray.

Of course, I would be the last person to criticize anyone for praying especially our Lord Jesus who went off to do exactly that. We might think that Jesus would not require prayer—He is God in the flesh, but he is also human at the same time. Jesus gave out spiritual energy all day every day, so he needed time for renewal—time alone with the Father—time to take the opportunity to recharge his spiritual batteries so that he could face the challenges that he encountered every time he entered a new town.

But his disciples lost patience with Jesus. They found him missing and began searching for him. The Bible says that they "hunted" for him. Now that's a good translation of the original Greek. That word is *katedioxen* (pronounced ka-te-dee-OX-en). That's the word that people used for hunting animals. It was as if the disciples had gone on a manhunt looking for Jesus—trying to figure out where he went—searching everywhere high and low!

They finally found him in a lonely place all by himself praying—seemingly oblivious to the crowds clamoring for his attention back in Capernaum. They couldn't believe that Jesus had gotten the people so stirred up and had then just walked out on them. It didn't make sense. But then Jesus did things all the time that didn't make sense to human understanding. They had marveled at Jesus' teachings—and everyone was in awe of his healing power—but the disciples silently wondered what Jesus was doing out here in the middle of nowhere when he was needed back in Capernaum!

I can imagine how they felt. Jesus had raised people's expectations—and then he disappeared. With nobody else to turn to, I am sure that the people turned to the disciples. There were only four of them at this point—Peter, Andrew, James, and John. But what could they do? They didn't know how to handle these crowds. They didn't know how to heal the sick. They had only recently begun to follow Jesus, and they certainly weren't qualified to stand in for him. I'm sure that the disciples were feeling the pressure—that they were mystified and maybe even a little miffed when Jesus disappeared and when he walked off and left them holding the bag.

When they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you" (v. 37). I think they really wanted to say, "What's the matter with you Jesus! Everyone's looking for you. Come on! Let's get back to town! Let's take care of business!" I think that they also wanted to say, "Furthermore, don't do that again! Don't leave us alone! Don't get the crowds all stirred up and then disappear. It's not fair! It's not fair to them and it's certainly not fair to us!"

But Jesus was having none of it. He answered: "Let's go elsewhere into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because I came out for this reason." I'm sure that the disciples were stunned. I can hear them saying, "But what about all these people who are searching for you Jesus? They want to see you. Everyone wants to talk to you. There are people who need healing and there is a young man who wants to be your disciple—there's a rich man who wants to build you a synagogue. You don't need to travel all over Galilee, Jesus. There are more opportunities right here in Capernaum than you can shake a stick at—opportunities to last a lifetime!"

An old phrase comes to mind when I think of this situation—"Let's strike while the iron is hot!" I don't know where that phrase came from either, but it means, "Let's take advantage of this opportunity! Let's not let this one slip through our fingers!" But Jesus said: "Let's go elsewhere into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because I came out for this reason."

"I came out for this reason." Another old phrase comes to mind is Jesus "had his eye on the ball." That comes right out of a sports context—this being Super Bowl Sunday, you can bet quarterback Tom Brady of the Patriots and Nick Foles of the Eagles, their coaches and teammates will have their eye on the ball every play of that game. When someone is highly alert, sharp and generally at their best, we say that they are "on

the ball." The term "keep your eye on the ball" was recorded to be used in baseball, cricket, croquet, football, golf, and soccer, because keeping your eye on the ball applies in most sports. It means staying focused on the one thing that counts most. Millions of fans along with the patriots and eagle football players in today's game will keep their collective eyes on the ball at all times—everyone will be watching Tom Brady and Nick Foles to see where the ball will be handed off or passed. Most important big games like the Super Bowl come down to who can make the least number of mistakes. But the players won't be listening for the crowd's cheers—They will be focused on the one thing that counts—keeping their eye on the ball and winning the Super Bowl!

In brother Paul Kuehn's class on "Witnessing and How does one give away one's faith"—in study four of Paul Little's Bible study, the author talks about "What is our Message?" He tells the story of hearing a Christian student of his driving with a non-Christian companion along a highway in Pennsylvania when they passed by a sign that said, "Jesus saves." The non-Christian passenger remarked very sincerely, "That's something I never thought of before—If Jesus is thrifty, then I ought to be too!"

Little goes on to talk about what the most popular misconceptions of what Christianity is not! Christianity is NOT being a Gentile; it's not a heritage, going to church, participating in a particular ritual, or even just following the teachings and believing the facts about Jesus Christ—Christianity is about Jesus Christ himself—Who he is, what he has done for us and how he can be known in and through a personal experience through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had his eye on the ball. "I came out for this reason," he said. What was it that he came to do? He came to preach—to proclaim the message to the neighboring towns. What message was that? Mark told us earlier that Jesus proclaimed, "the Good News of the Kingdom of God"—that he preached, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent, and believe in the Good News" (1:14-15).

There's a big lesson here for us. We, as Christ's church, need to be doing many things. We need to respond not only to our local community but to the world's global family. We need to feed the hungry—provide shelter for the homeless—visit the sick and those in prison—send blankets and money to hurricane victims—support and partner with Christian charities that connect us to those people in other countries needing assistance natural as well as man-made disasters.

But those things are not our first order of business. Our first order of business is proclaiming "the Good News of the Kingdom of God"—preaching "Repent and believe in the good news." That's what it means for us to keep our eye on the ball. If we are not preaching the Good News of Christ and bringing others into God's kingdom, the other things won't amount to much.

Yes, it is MY job as your preacher, to preach the Gospel on Sunday mornings at nine am. But it is OUR job to preach the Gospel the other hundred sixty-seven hours of the week. It is YOUR job to preach the Gospel in the many places where you have influence—certainly in your family—to your neighbors—to co-workers—to friends—perhaps even to the panhandler that you may meet on the street.

Two essential ingredients mentioned in the intro of Paul Little's study on witnessing by his wife Maria Little is this: She says, to know Jesus Christ personally means first making a commitment through a conscious decision to say, "Yes I do want to belong to you Lord Jesus Christ." This is a continual and lifetime commitment based on a personal relationship with Christ. Secondly, one must love and obey our living Lord and Savior one hundred percent. Once you understand the basics Maria says, one can become an effective ambassador for Christ. This is the greatest challenge and highest honor ever given to us.

Little continues in his study by saying, witnessing goes far beyond just spouting a lot of Bible verses at non-Christians. It involves all that we are and do—it's a way of life—the Christian life—the "art" of explaining to someone who Jesus is and why trusting him as Lord Savior is the best news in the world.

Do you need to be discreet about that? Of course! It is, as we all know, possible to alienate people instead of persuading them. But the problem for most Christians isn't that we are likely to alienate people by being too pushy—but that our witness is likely to be so low-key as to be invisible—no witness at all—and that's not what Christ asks of us.

Let's start with the witness to your family. Surely you can let your family know that you are a Christian. Surely you can help them to grow in faith. Surely you can make faith a daily part of your family's life. Surely you can expect your children to participate in Sunday school—and worship—and church youth groups.

Would it be too much for Christ to expect that you will make it a point to eat at least one meal a day as a family—and that you begin that meal with a prayer of thanksgiving? Last night at our dining out fellowship at Buzz's steak house, we prayed together twice on two separate tables because we couldn't all sit at one table. Would it be too much for Christ to expect that you who are parents of small children will find a book of Bible stories and read those stories to your children in the evening? Would it be too much for Christ to expect that you will have prayer with your children at bedtime? Would it be too much for Christ to expect that you will personally make Sunday worship a priority in your life—and that you will encourage your family to do likewise?

Or maybe your family is grown. Perhaps you have grandchildren. Perhaps you could give some thought to how you might encourage them in the faith. I'm not talking about anything difficult here. I am not talking about buttonholing strangers on the street and asking, "Do you know Jesus?" I'm talking about your own family—the place where Christ expects you to take the lead. It doesn't matter whether you are father or mother or child—or grandfather or grandmother. In the family, each person is important, and each can help the other to grow in faith.

When the disciples found Jesus and asked him to take care to the crowds in Capernaum, he said that he had to go to neighboring towns to proclaim the Gospel, because that was what he had come to do. That is what Rick Warren in the Purpose Driven Church would call one of the essential 5 elements of a healthy church— Evangelism. God called Jesus to do it and that is what God calls us to do—to proclaim the Gospel—to share this life saving and transformational story with everyone. Friends, let us be faithful to that calling and stay in the game—let's keep our eye on the ball and God will bless us mightily. Amen. Let us pray.