

I read this exegetical excerpt from Karoline Lewis, professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary:

*I do not like hockey, I really, really don't. This coming from a Minnesota resident whose 13-year-old son is a big-time hockey player. My reason? I am a native Californian. Need more reasons? I don't get it. I'm not a big sports fan. And then there's this: I just think that if it takes 45 minutes to put stuff on your body to protect yourself from serious injury, well, maybe that's something you should not be doing in the first place. Also, being in the warming room, locker room, whatever you want to call it, helping my son get on the gear and lace up the skates, here's the thing, there's simply not enough deodorant **in the world** to make that smell go away. And then after the game, the gear and the boy get in my car.*

What am I doing here?

I don't like hockey. I'm freezing my you-know-what off even in an indoor ice rink and not even my venti nonfat no-foam latte from Starbucks can help.

But there I am. As many games as I can attend, swearing I would never do this, but screaming with the rest of parents, "Get in there, Stellan! Go for the puck! Ice it!" like my son could even hear me. And like I even know what I am saying.

And here's the weird thing. I am actually now watching the games and getting some things. And I've started to realize, "Wow, this is a really hard sport. This takes a lot of skill. It's a fight for the puck at every turn. For all intents and purposes, this is exciting!"

Yet, at the same time, I'm watching my son's head hit the ice, a lot of very sharp skates coming dangerously close to his face, and wondering if the gear that took 45 minutes to put on will really protect him. Really. And I think concussions. And CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy). And bodychecking next year.

What am I doing here?

This is the question you ask when you are called back to yourself.¹

What am I doing here? I wonder if Simon's mother-in-law asked that when she was able to rise after her illness. Jesus' ministry has gone public—In Mark's account- Jesus has gone from teaching at the Synagogue—amazing everyone present with his words—and healing a screaming demoniac outside the temple- to the Shabbat (Sabbath) meal at Peter's wife's mother's home- the home of an extended family as was common in first century. There the disciples tell him of Peter's mother in law's illness, and he immediately goes to her "raises her up" -Mark chooses his words carefully here- and they celebrate a meal together.

A first cursory glance of the story in Mark's Gospel may have you saying- Jesus cured Simon's mother in law so she could get up and "serve" them—all our egalitarian impulses might bristle at the account—but the word Mark uses is the word for minister---the same word that he uses after Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is over and angels come and "minister" to him. The word is diakonae, from which we get the word Deacon- minister.

¹ "Dear Working Preacher" www.workingpreacher.org (February 1, 2015)

Simon's wife's mother, as the head of the household, would have been accorded the honor of attending to the important visitors like the Rabbi coming for a Shabbat meal. This would be honor, not servitude. Certainly Peter's wife or a servant could have done it. But think—how many times have you gone to an important meal with your family—Thanksgiving or Christmas and encountered the “get out of the kitchen” rule? Only those who have the privilege of doing their special dish, only the real cooks get to be in the center of that activity. The rest of us sit in the living room munching on the crudité. Simon's mother in law was blessed with healing, and able to live into the blessing of being the honored host

And immediately after that, at the end of the Sabbath, the setting of the sun was the official ending of the Sabbath, “the whole city” gathers outside the house courtyard. Long after dark, Jesus heals, touches, casts out demons, cures diseases. Finally they are all gone. A long day and night.

But before dawn, Jesus has found his way to a deserted place, in the dark, in prayer. And when they find him—the words Mark uses are literally “chased him down” --they say everyone is looking for you.

And Jesus says “That's why I'm here. Let's go.”

What are we doing here? I think the disciples might have been asking themselves that question after all that they have encountered so far:

The pace of this account (we're only in chapter 1!) doesn't let up. Mark uses the word “immediately” 39 times in 16 chapters. Pace of Mark is astounding- from the very first, a crescendo of activity. John the Baptizer announces the good news, Jesus appears at the Jordan, baptized, the heavens split open, driven into the wilderness, tempted, comes out, calls the disciples, who abandon their job and follow him. One commentator writes –“there is no time to grab a breath.” Jesus leads them to a synagogue on the Sabbath, huge crowds moved at his teaching- exorcises demonic powers, heals Simon's mother in law, heals the city at the city, up before dawn tracked down, and says let's go.

What are we doing here?

But there is a balance in his ministry already, right from the beginning- the work of blessing and being blessed, public ministry and private. Private- Simon's mother in law, public, city at the door private- before dawn in a deserted place, public- ministry to the rest of Capernaum. Jesus's need for physical and spiritual recovery is plain. The disciples don't get it. They have no interest in interrupting a perfectly successful preaching tour with solitude and quiet. But Jesus' ministry, though hectic, is balanced.

Now this is not a sermon to say- Jesus had a balance in his life- and so should we. He was Jesus. We are not. The spiritual disciplines of prayer, rest, spiritual and physical recovery are not one more thing to add to our to-do list.

But the question, when we can ask it, “What are we doing here?” can call us back to ourselves. I think that is why Jesus was up before dawn, or going out alone for a walk, or seeking solitude- so that he could be called back to himself in the presence of his Abba, and remember who he was, and whose he was.

The pace of our lives is frantic- we are doing the best we can. So this story is not to wag the finger at us. But. As my spiritual director says, “Where is God's invitation to you?” What is God inviting you to do? Or what am I doing here? Or what are we- God and I – doing here?

Things happen- family members get sick- we have to be in unexpected places- the dog eats the fire starter log- the tire pressure light goes on, our child has a melt down. Our balancing acts are not so balanced, often.

But there may be an agenda in God's invitation in this account in Mark's Gospel. And agenda that is calling us back to ourselves. Because our agendas are full. People will always chase us down. We are not going to get to stay where we are—Mark's story sweeps us along to the rest of the week, the rest of our lives, the rest of the story . . . wherever Jesus takes us.

Perhaps Jesus is inviting us—not to try to “achieve” a balance in our lives- but to let him take the balance of our lives, public and private, to wherever he wants us to go.

What could our lives be if Jesus took us by the hand and raise us up from whatever was laying us low? What if we let him find a quiet place in us? What if we let the deep spaces of our hearts answer that question- what am I doing here?

At Capernaum in Galilee, There is an archeological site identified as the site of the house of Peter’s mother-in-law. I was there as part of a tour. It was my second visit to the site. I was the assistant tour director; call it morale booster, problem solver, head counter, lunch order taker, and general cheerleader.

At the very beginning of our tour, we told the participants, “Pay attention to where God is speaking to you, because it may be a moment that you aren’t expecting.” In other words, be prepared to be “verklemt” at an unusual time. Israel is so full of history, pathos, sacred sites, and our own desires that it would be hard to travel to this country and not be overwhelmed at some point. You never know, we said, when the place and your heart and the Spirit are going to join together in a moment of emotion. So part of my task was to be available for folks who were teary or overcome by their experience, the moment, a place, or their full hearts.

The Capernaum site has a plaza, the remaining walls of a synagogue, and a very modern, hexagonal, glass walled church. The church is built over the archeological site of several layers of habitation: crumbling partial stone walls identified as a second century house, surrounded by more partial walls identified as a fourth century house church, encircled yet more blocks and stone that might once have been a fifth or sixth century Byzantine church. The site is roped off at plaza level, but when you walk up the stairs and into the modern hexagonal church over the ruins, you find yourself at the back row of stone benches leading downward to the center floor made of clear Plexiglas, surrounded by a railing and kneeling cushions. You can see the white stones through the floor, and kneeling around the center square, are pilgrims who come, holding prayer cards, jewelry, and pictures, face down out over the Plexiglas as they prayed.

It was late in the afternoon; I had been there earlier, keeping an eye out for my group as they came to look through the church, to sit in the pews, to pray. I came in again, in mother hen mode, just before the site closed. There were just a few people there now, and a priest in brown robes, sitting by the door, arms crossed, head lowered, apparently asleep. This time I knelt at the railing and peered down through the Plexiglas to the broken stone walls below. I didn’t know why I was there.

And I don’t know what happened, but suddenly I was weeping. Was it in sorrow for all the wounds I knew in others? Gratitude for the healing in and around me? I don’t know. But it was a shoulder shaking; sobbing that came quickly and startlingly. I was surprised, and looked around to see if anyone had caught me in my moment of distress. No one was there, except the priest at the door, still with his arms crossed, chin on his chest. I got up, wiped my eyes, and hurried toward the door. I hadn’t planned on my own verklemt moment. The priest in the chair got up, I thought, to let me out. But he stopped, facing me, and with an emphatic but soft “Hmm!” gestured to me to bow my head. I did without thinking, and he laid his hands on my head and began a prayer. I understood not a word of the language. He removed his hands, and I looked up. Then he gave another “Hmm!” and dismissed me.

What was he doing there? I don’t know. What was I doing there? God knew. Apparently I was receiving a blessing I didn’t even know I needed. This was not on my agenda, getting called back to myself.

So I offer this to you, today, with all that you have done already and all that will come, to ask, “What am I doing here?” and imagine a moment, a space for the possibility that in the middle of your agenda, God will at some point call you back to yourself-, and see if you can feel the hands of Christ, who will simply give you the blessing you didn’t even know you needed. May it be so.

Amen.