

“MORE THAN A SOUND BITE!”

Mark 1:29-39

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After all the hype and all the excitement, another Superbowl is now history, whether your team won or lost. Even though the economy is struggling, advertisers paid top dollar to promote their products. Millions of people were watching, not only the game, but the commercials, causing companies to spend up to \$3 million for 30 seconds of advertising. Writers and graphic artists labored for untold hours on those commercials, hoping to say something in 30 seconds that the audience would remember long after the big game was over. Billboards try to capture our attention in a few seconds as we speed by. Our church staff was told recently that when folks click onto our website, we have about ten seconds to grab them, or else they will be on to something else. Television news reporters do not go into detail about most of the incidents they report. Mostly they just give us the headlines, and a few sound bites to ponder.

What are sound bites? Sound bites are quick phrases that we remember, brief chunks of information that stick in our minds. They crawl across our television screens, pop up on our computers, and blast out our radio speakers as we go about our day.

A few years ago, I was teaching a class at a national youth gathering on social issues and the teaching of the United Methodist Church. Where does our church stand on abortion and gun control and homosexuality and cloning and *in vitro* fertilization and all the other issues facing contemporary people? The camera crew that was making a documentary of the entire event walked into the room while I was talking. I said, “*You need to understand that the United Methodist Church is big enough and broad minded enough to include people as conservative as George Bush and as liberal as Hillary Clinton.*” (Both George Bush and Hillary Clinton are members of the United Methodist Church.) Well, the camera people picked up on that, and my quote, “*A church big enough and broad minded enough to include people as conservative as George Bush and as liberal as Hillary Clinton*” was in the documentary that went all over the world. A sound bite, you see.

This morning’s Lectionary passage reads like *Headline News*. Mark was kind of the television newscaster of his day. While Matthew and Luke and John give many more details about Jesus’ life and flesh out the stories in much greater detail, Mark is brief, and terse, and to the point. Stories that sometimes take a chapter in the other Gospels are handled by Mark in a sentence or two. In these eleven verses, which take less than a minute to read, there are at least five sound bites of headline news.

First of all, Jesus, having called the disciples and convinced them to follow him, goes to Simon’s house and learns that Simon’s mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. With typical compassion and love, Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up. And the Bible tells us that the

fever left her. In grateful appreciation, she goes to the kitchen and fixes them all something to eat.

News of the fact that Jesus has healed a man who was demon-possessed (last week's story), and now Simon's mother-in-law, begins to spread. The next night the headline reads, "Jesus, the healer, is in town." You know what happens. Folks start flocking to Jesus to be cured of their ailments and their diseases. News of healing and help spreads quickly, doesn't it? When doctors find a new drug or a new procedure, folks come in droves to be helped. As a center of healing, the Cleveland hospitals are continuing their expansion, in spite of the economic turndown that is curtailing such projects in most of the other areas of our society. Those who can alleviate pain and suffering are always in high demand.

It is an interesting aside in this brief account that Mark notes that Jesus cured many. So often in my ministry I have been called up to pray for those who are sick and those with catastrophic illness. I have often prayed for healing. I have prayed for miracles. I've seen healing occur. I've seen miracles take place. But not everyone I have prayed for has been cured of the infirmities that plagued them. I confess to you this morning that I do not fully understand why God does not cure everyone who calls on him for help. As a seminary professor of mine once said, "When I get to heaven, if I get to heaven, I have a few questions I want to ask God." This certainly is one of them! Know, however, my friends, that all healing comes from God, and that whether or not we are cured of our diseases, we can receive healing from God. God is able to heal the hurts of every human heart.

Now the headline changes. "Healer disappears! Last seen at Simon's house." The Bible tells us what the reporters don't know: that Jesus has a habit of getting up early, while it is still dark, and going to a deserted place to pray. Working with people who are sick is exhausting. Ask any doctor. Working with people who are in pain is draining. Ask any nurse. Listening to people's problems and having them pour out their hearts to you is hard work. Ask any counselor or pastor. And so Jesus withdraws from the crowds for meditation and time alone with God.

The reporters don't know where to find Jesus, but the disciples know where to look. And when they find him, they exclaim, "*Everyone is searching for you!*" It won't be long until the paparazzi catch up with you, even in your place of quiet meditation. You are the man of the hour, Jesus. Everyone wants a piece of you!

The next day's newspaper does not report that Jesus is back in the synagogue ready to preach another one of those good sermons and heal more sick people. The headline news is not able to report, "Exorcisms offered from 9 to 5. Film at 11." Instead, Jesus announces that he is moving on! He reminds the disciples that his message is not just for the folks at Capernaum, but for all the towns of Galilee, indeed for the whole world. Jesus is more than a healer. Curing the sick is only part of his mission. In spite of his warm reception and the number of sick people that have not had the benefit of his healing touch, Jesus feels the need to move on.

No doubt the reporters are taken aback by this latest news. After all, the words, "*Everyone is searching for you*" were not created by a Madison Avenue account executive eager to market a popular product. They are an honest statement coming from Jesus' disciples themselves. But Jesus moves on. And no doubt, those first century reporters, much like today's newscasters, were on to the next story that would catch the attention of their audience.

Yes, sound bites get our attention, and they keep our interest for a while. But soon the media, knowing our short attention span, moves on to something else. The devastation caused

by Hurricane Rita and Katrina, the floods of Iowa, the fires in California, the earthquake in India, the tsunami in Indonesia — it will take years for these areas to recover. Yet we do not read or hear much about any of them these days. Instead, the reporters have moved on to the latest breaking stories. They are looking for new sound bites that will capture the attention of the mass audience to which they must appeal in order to stay in business.

As I read the biblical headlines these past few weeks in preparation for this sermon, one sound bite kept ringing in my ears, “*Everyone is searching for you.*” The Bible doesn’t say, “Most of the people are looking for you, Jesus.” “Sixty-eight percent approve of what you are doing.” “The Administrative Board voted by large majority to look for you, Jesus.” No, the Bible says that everyone was looking for him. “*The whole city*” gathered at Simon’s house when they heard that Jesus had cured Simon’s mother-in-law. Jesus is a popular healer. We have already established that. He drew a crowd wherever he went.

But I believe the words, “*Everyone is searching for you,*” are **more than a sound bite**. I believe these words speak to us on a deeper level than the report in the *Plain Dealer* or the television news. I truly believe that everyone is looking for Jesus, whether he or she realizes it or not. I believe that was true in Galilee in the first century. I believe it is true in Cleveland and everywhere else today. The message of Jesus speaks to the deepest needs and the most profound hungers of the human heart. Everyone needs what Jesus has to offer. Everyone yearns for his compassion, his love, his understanding, his help. Everyone is searching for him.

Many do not realize that it is Jesus for whom they are searching. While most of us would be abhorred by the practice of idol worship in our day, such as was practiced in ancient times, we bow to many altars in our society today. We naively think that the false gods of money and success and entertainment and sports and a dozen other things will satisfy us. When will we realize that he is the one for whom we are searching? When will we let his healing touch mend our broken hearts?

Jesus came to us not only with a message of help and hope, but also shows us how to live. His life and ministry are a model for our lives. His life was a balance between prayer and action. Another seminary professor of mine used to say, “Birds have a right wing and a left wing. Both are needed if they are to fly.” The right wing is our contemplative side. We must take time for Bible study and prayer. But we can’t sit and read our Bibles for very long until we are propelled to action, to practicing our faith. In like manner, we can’t serve others and minister to their needs for very long until we are forced to our knees in prayer in order to draw the strength we need for continued service. Yes, a right wing and a left wing — we need both if we are to follow Jesus.

Notice that Jesus took time even in the midst of a busy schedule for rest and renewal. He was intentional about his prayer life. There is something about the early morning hours, when we are fresh and our minds are uncluttered, that seems ideal for meditation and reflection and prayer. Jesus knew the secret of spending those early moments of the new day – not reading the paper or watching the *Today* show or listening to the radio — but in a quiet time of prayer and meditation with God.

Jesus also knew when to move on. Sometimes we get stuck where we are and don’t seem to grow and make much progress. I have a person who comes to see me once a year to talk about his spiritual journey. I keep notes on what he tells me. Last year I challenged him. He was describing the same problems that he had been complaining about the year before. Maybe

you are in a rut, I suggested. He is not alone. There are times when I get stuck, too. When the disciples told Jesus that everyone in Capernaum was looking for him, he responded by saying, “*Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.*”(Mark 1:38) Jesus had a clear sense of his mission and purpose. He could not spend all his time with the same people in the same place and fulfill the purpose that God had for his life. Where is God leading us, and what is God calling us to do? How do we best proclaim the message that God is in our midst, ready to heal the hearts of all who are broken and cast down?

Yes, I truly believe the everyone is searching for Jesus and his way of life. The words, “*Everyone is searching for you,*” are **more than a sound bite**. They are a statement of profound truth. The good news is that the One we are searching for has found us and offers us the healing we need. May we open our hearts and our lives to his healing touch this very day.

Prayer: Dear God, as you came into Galilee with words of healing and hope, so come into our lives with your healing touch this day. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.