

Finding the Right Balance

Mark 2: 23 – 3:6

Sid Batts

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina
June 3, 2018

One of the mighty struggles I see among people is our search to find the right balance in our life. It doesn't matter whether we are young or old, married, divorced or single, childless, with children or an empty nest, there is a universal struggle in American culture with finding the right balance.

Do you know what I am talking about?

- It is the trying to find the right balance in work and family,
- Or in rest and recreation,
- In tending to our to do list or attending to relationships,
- In doing things for pleasure or doing things for others.

It is a constant struggle, don't you think, in finding the right balance?

And we can describe this struggle in various terms:

- Is it being or doing?
- Is it forgiving or holding people accountable – what's the right balance?
- Is it living with law or with grace?
- Is it worshipping to fill our spiritual tank or is it doing something with our faith?
- Is it reading a book to nurture our souls and stimulate our brain or volunteering for a charitable cause?
- Is it tending to the needs of our children or tending to our own needs?
- As a student, what is the balance between studying and playing?
- What is the balance?

One way to talk about balance is found in this quote: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." That was said by Irenaeus, a third century theologian. Being fully alive comes from having the right balance and not feeling schizophrenic from a life that is exaggerated, or out of kilter. I am confidently sure, that when you and I have balance, we also have joy. When we are out of balance, the joy goes missing.

And at times I think we, as Americans, are losing this battle of balance...and our souls are withering without it. If we look around our culture, from gun violence to political ineptness, a lack of ethics being unable to tell the truth, the penchant to attacking the character of people who disagree with us, and sinking to the lowest rung of national conversation. We are seeing the signs of a culture whose soul is withering. I believe it is connected to losing our balance.

I read recently an interview with a respected brain surgeon. The conversation centered on how easy it is to become self-focused or pre-occupied with work and the resulting loss of focus on family, friends and the other things most of us believe are important. Such as hobbies, past-times and exercise. As a result people begin to lose their balance and joy.

The neurosurgeon said, “Years ago I attended a lecture where the professor told us we should have a triangle-shaped life with one side being our work focus, another side being our family focus and the third side being an athletic focus, or a fourth side which could be a faith focus. The key is... .to maintain balance in our lives.”

I

One of the intriguing books on my bookshelf is by John Sanford who was a theologian and a psychoanalyst. The book is: *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus’ Sayings*.

Sanford offers a psychological examination of Jesus and says that Jesus was the most well-balanced individual who ever lived. In Jesus, he says, God created the ultimate human being who was the perfect balance between such character traits of introversion, extroversion, intuition, thinking and feeling.

Stanford notes that Jesus balanced all of these personality characteristics. He thrived in social settings such as weddings and parties. He spoke before large audiences and he also spent many a night in silence and solitude, praying and listening to God. Jesus possessed exceptional senses that allowed him to listen and see what was occurring around him, but he also had incredible intuitive powers that helped him discern the motivations of others.

Jesus was thoughtful and decisive, commanding and compassionate. This is to say Jesus was the ultimate balanced person.

II

Which brings us to Jesus in today’s story from Mark’s gospel. It was the Sabbath and remember that keeping the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments from God. It would

do us well to remember that God gave this commandment to the Jews who had been enslaved by the Egyptians. As slaves, the Jews did the non-stop, back breaking work for Pharaoh's Egyptian Empire: building, making bricks, digging trenches, making weapons and forging roads. The Jewish slaves worked twenty-four-seven! So after Moses lead the enslaved Jews out of Egypt and on toward a promised land, God gave them Ten Commandments as a code of faithfulness to live by.

The commandment in question in today's story, is the Sabbath commandment.

As Jesus and his disciples were going through some grain fields, his disciples began to pick grain because they were hungry.

But the Pharisees, who were intent on honoring God by observing the law, raised this question to Jesus: "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

Jesus responded by pointing to Jewish hero King David who had eaten holy bread in the temple when he was hungry... even though it was against the Jewish law.

But finding the balance between the spirit of the law and how one observed the law was tricky. The Sabbath law had been given as a commandment of grace and liberation. A boundary had been given so that work had an end time, followed by rest.

But over the centuries this commandment of grace turned into endless regulations. By the time Jesus came along, the Jewish lawyers had been busy. Work was forbidden on the Sabbath and rules defining work prohibited tying a knot, lighting a fire, moving a lamp, going on a journey, preparing meals, even healing the sick. In Jesus' day there were over fifteen hundred prohibitions surrounding the Sabbath.

What had started as grace had turned into oppression.

So when the Pharisees objected to Jesus' disciples picking grain to eat, Jesus finally says: "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath."

This is balanced Jesus, the most perfectly balanced human being ever, reminding folks that practicing Sabbath is about balance, wholeness and spiritual health... not about following petty rules.

III

Okay, we get it, you may be murmuring. Jesus was big on balance. But, we are not Jesus. And we find ourselves in a constant struggle to find and maintain our balance. Indeed part of our Christian journey is finding this equilibrium.

So to help me, I go back to the late business guru, Peter Drucker, whose writings on leadership, organizations and management have been instructive for a generation . For Drucker, an effective life is achieved through understanding our priorities and then setting goals. Does that resonate with you?

Now you are going to have to hang with me here while I connect the dots of Drucker's theories to our spiritual quest for balance.

Drucker talks about the importance of setting goals and deciding which are the most important. For instance, on any given day, in any given moment, what is your priority? Is checking your email more important than calling your grandmother? Is taking a hot shower more important than talking to your best friend for the third time that day? Drucker would say that in order to stay on course, we have to re-examine our priorities regularly.

What that requires is setting both long and short-term goals. In business, this is now called "Tactics and Strategy." Strategy is the long-term goal; tactics are the short term goals that will get you there.

For example, if we want to be to be a successful writer (is our long term goal,) our short term goal might be to get our first article published. Then we will need to break it down to even smaller steps such as taking a writing class, writing for thirty minutes every day, or joining a writing group.

Which means being specific with our tactics.

Or for instance, our goal may be "I'm going to have quality time with my children." Drucker would say that is too vague. We'd have to also name a short term tactic such as "I'm going to spend one hour alone with each child this week." Balance comes from setting a specific goal and then knowing we have accomplished it.

The same is true if we say that we are going to eat more healthy or exercise more. The Drucker School would say set something specific with that generalized goal such as "I'll have fruit with breakfast every morning;" or "I will run, walk or exercise for thirty minutes, on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday."

So how does this apply to balance? We name the values or goals most important to us. Imagine it is: family, work, faith, healthier exercise, passion, hobby, or interest.

So you have a five sided pentagon with each side representing a value. Drucker would say – take each side and then form tactics to how we achieve those goals or values.

Are you imaging a triangle, quadrangle, pentagon and a value each side represents? If faith is not represented in one of those sides, you might ask yourself why you are here?

IV

The final part of the Jesus story is when he enters the synagogue and finds a man with a withered hand. The law keepers are keeping a close watch on Jesus to see if he has the audacity to break another Sabbath commandment.

Jesus looks at the Pharisees and asks, “Is it lawful to do good or harm on the Sabbath...?”

And he turns to the man with a crippled hand and says, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man’s hand was made whole, restored, healed.

Which says something to us, not only about how Jesus healed the body but what happens when we bring our withered, unbalanced lives before him?

I hear the words, “Stretch out!”

Stretch out!

Achieving the balance we seek and need is a matter of stretching ourselves toward Jesus, then listening to his words through scripture that will help us determine the right priorities for each of us at this time in our lives. And then living into a new balance.

For this is what I know: joy is the result of balance.

Stretch out.ⁱ

Sources:

“Five Ways to Find Balance in your Life,” In “Off the Couch” *Psychology Today*, by F. Diane Barth

“Achieving Balance: the Secret to Happiness and Productivity” by Marek P. Zabriskie, Thomas Church

“A history of Peter Drucker and his impact on management theory” by Elizabeth Montsangou, Europeanceo