

“Too Busy to Live”
Text: Isaiah 40:27-31; Mark 1:32-39
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“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35”

Several years ago a wonderful article appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine written by Adam Gopnik. It was entitled “Bumping into Charlie Ravioli”. Intrigued by the title, I began to read. Who in the world is Charlie Ravioli? It turns out that Charlie is the name of Gopnik’s three-year-old daughter’s imaginary friend. One day, Olivia - that is the daughter’s name - was in the room with her father playing with her toy cell phone. She held the phone up to her ear and said, “Ravioli, Ravioli, are you there? This is Olivia. Can you play? Well, call me.” Then she snapped the cell phone shut, shook her head and said, “I always get Charlie’s answering machine.” Another day, her father overheard his daughter speaking again on the toy cell phone, this time to a new person named Laurie. It turned out that Laurie was Charlie Ravioli’s imaginary assistant. If you can imagine! Unfortunately, Laurie told Olivia that Mr. Ravioli was at a meeting and would be unable to play that day.

Adam Gopnik was concerned about his daughter and talked to his sister, a grown up, who was a psychologist. She assured him that there was nothing unusual about a three or four-year-old child's having imaginary friends. Then, what began to concern the father was how his three-year-old had been able to capture so perfectly the tone and pace of their family's life, and indeed the society in which their family lived.

Not all of us, but many of us are busy. We live by our calendars. We leave voice mails and e-mails for one another. We try to stay in touch. But often we fail to connect, person-to-person with our friends, families, with ourselves, or with God, whom Paul Tillich called the very “Ground of our Being”. We live in a world of technology, where we deal with voice mails and e-mails and faxes and the Internet. Then, there is the other real world of our material lives, where we walk down the sidewalk and drive our automobiles and order food in restaurants. We have feet in both worlds, and they are often simply too much. The whole matter of the communication loop seems to close completely only rarely. You know how it is with letter writing. I write you a letter, and if you remember the manners your mother taught, you will write me one back. But with e-mails, we have perpetual communication. An e-mail can end with a phrase such as “give me a call” or “let's get together,” “any suggestions about a good day to have lunch...?” It never ends. In this web of incompleteness, this tangle of busyness, this thick soup of interaction, it seems almost impossible to maintain an authentic life with other people and an authentic life in God.

In those rare moments when we are at quiet, what do we do? Do we pray? Do we get centered in ourselves so that God can have his way with us? Or do we think, “Wait a

minute! I better go check my e-mail one more time.” What was it Barbara Walters used to say at the end of her broadcasts? “We’re in touch, so you be in touch?” We are in touch with so much. It is very hard to remain in touch with the people that matter, with the God who created us, with the self with whom we need to be in communion.

I wonder how many people in the sanctuary this morning have a cell phone somewhere on your person or maybe in your pocketbook, but somewhere. Mine is in my pocketbook in the church office. I’ve tried not to depend on my cell phone so much since it occurred to me that if I were a heart surgeon and needed to be notified that a heart was ready to be transplanted, then I should be reachable every single minute, 24-7. I have come to realize that we can make it through the church hour without being in touch with anything or anyone except our true selves, one another, and our loving and merciful God. One of the great things about worship, one of the reasons I hate to miss it, and I hate it when you miss it, is that for the one hour of worship, we realize that we are not the center of the universe. We realize our place in the world, when we are able to detach ourselves from the endless traffic of life.

In the story we’ve heard from Mark’s gospel, even Jesus seemed to be caught up in the endless traffic of human existence. Everyone in town wanted to be in touch with him. As soon as they left the synagogue, Mark tells us breathlessly, Jesus and his followers went to Simon’s house. You would think that they were going to Simon’s house to take some time out, maybe to have a meal, to rest and relax, but as soon as they reached Simon’s house, Jesus was told that Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a fever, and Jesus went to work. He healed her. One of the Bible’s funniest verses comes next – women, you can especially identify: “Jesus took her by her hand and lifted her up. The fever left her and she began to serve them.” Straight from the sickbed to cook stove is what it sounds like to me.

Evening comes, and Jesus’ work not only is not done, it has multiplied. At sundown everybody wants to be in touch with him again. Everybody in town who has something wrong - the whole city gathered to watch. It just wears you out to think about it! Jesus, compassionate Savior, embodiment of the power of God, walked right into the heart of human need that surrounded him. But that’s not the whole story. That is what he did at sunset. The next morning, though, “while it was still dark, he went out by himself, to a deserted place and prayed.” The pressing needs had not gone anywhere. Even while Jesus was praying, the disciples were looking for him, and when they found him they said, in an exasperated way, “Don’t you know everybody’s looking for you? They need you!” Of course, they needed him. That was precisely the reason he had gone away to pray. That is why he had gotten out of touch with all the busyness around him, so that he could reconnect with the source of his strength. How could he offer his healing touch, his compassionate concern, if he was disconnected from God and from the mission that God gave him?

Hanging over the bookcase in my study at home for a number of years, has been a commandment from the Bible in nice calligraphy and framed. It is the commandment I have found hardest to keep over the years. I wonder if you can imagine what it is? From the 46th Psalm: *Be still and know that I am God.* “Be still and know that I am God.”

One of the most interesting things about our hectic lives is that the faster we go, the more likely we are to forget where we came from, where we're going, and whom we are supposed to please. Speed is the enemy of memory. Think about it. When you want to remember something, you say, Hold on a second! Without a regular way to slow down and to let our spirits catch up with our bodies, so that we can be re-centered in the One who is our guide and friend, the author of our salvation, our refuge and strength in time of trouble, we will be in trouble sooner or later. Be still and know that I am God.

That was the secret of Jesus. He never, ever thought it was all on his shoulders. His mission had come to him from another realm, and he knew that as long as God wanted him to do it, he would have the strength and energy to do it. If he had the good sense to receive what God had to give him, he could go on relieving suffering and standing for the good and casting out the demons.

There is not a soul alive who has not had to deal with the demon of busyness, the demon of distraction. I don't know how you keep that demon at bay in your life. I am sure there is more than one way to do it. Jesus did it this way: he prayed – he prayed. By prayer, he restored his soul.

I remember a hymn I grew up singing.

There is a place of quiet rest near to the heart of God.

A place where sin cannot molest near to the heart of God.

There is no better place to be than quietly in the presence of God.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes, "There comes a level of prayer when you stop worrying about whether or not you're getting words right... But your only question is 'Am I sitting in the light of God's love? And with God's help becoming once again, who I really am?'" Who you really are. Our thoughts are usually all over the place running after this and that and the other. Prayer is drawing back in those tentacles that keep wriggling out. You gather them back, you gather yourself back. You gather your heart in prayer, and "you just sit there being a creature in the hand of God." (2)

I know you are busy, but Jesus who also was busy, found this kind of activity indispensable to his demanding life. Why in the world would any of us think it was dispensable in our own life?

I'm just back from vacation. I got in late yesterday with sand from the beach still in my shoes. This morning, I remembered something that one of my favorite contemporary thinkers Parker Palmer has written in his book, *The Active Life*. He refers to what he calls "the vacation approach" to life. He does not recommend it. He's not opposed to vacations, but he says we don't do it exactly right, because what we do is that we get exhausted. And then we take a little vacation. And then we come back and turn on the computer and get going again. (3) That's no way to live. What we need to live is the rhythm that our heart teaches us. Have you noticed that your heart beats, and then it stops? It beats, then stops. Action, contemplation. Going, stopping. Remembering to stop so that our inner power can be restored. If we're going to be the wise, strong people God needs for us to be in these troubling and anxious days, we cannot keep

running around all over the place and tuning in to CNN and Fox News every five minutes, as if there's going to be an answer out there anywhere. We need to be in touch with the spiritual realities that undergird human life, human history and human society.

Isaiah the prophet issued a security alert to the Hebrew people when they were in a particularly difficult situation. He said to them, "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength." Your strength shall be renewed, not just so that you can muddle through, but so that some will be able to mount up with wings as eagles. Others will be able to run and not be weary, and still others will be able to walk and not faint, not be overwhelmed.

There is a temptation today to fall into what Parker Palmer calls, "functional atheism". That is the assumption that there is no power at work in the world besides our own. I think we could learn something from Islam in this regard. I learned recently of a word that Muslims often use - *inshallah*. It means, "if God wishes," "if God is willing". God willing, the boat will land at the ferry; God willing, we will live to see another day. Is it possible we Westerners might need just a little less faith in our own convictions, a little more skepticism about our own capacities, and a little more trust in God, a little more turning and saying, "We don't know what to do. God, please help us. We are waiting for you to guide us and to empower us and to show us the way?" (4) There is another player on the field, my friends, a player whose powers are beyond the princes of the earth. The other player is the Alpha and Omega, the One in whom all things hold together. We have seen the majesty and fullness of God in Jesus Christ, who is the head of all principalities and powers, the One before whom and in whom all things exist. (5) That's power! That's real power; that's the power given to us through our baptisms and through the continuing grace of God.

As many of you know, I have a Charlie in my family. He's four and he is very much interested in Luke Skywalker. We watched several Star Wars movies together at the beach, and when we weren't watching movies we were doing these laser things: Take that, Darth Vader! "I'm Batman, and I am going after the Joker!"

By faith, we know that the powers and principalities have already been vanquished by the cross of Jesus Christ. The world changed 2000 years ago, and now it is of Christ's kingdom that there will be no end.

Jesus said to his disciples, I've got to go away, but I will be sending the Holy Spirit to you. Never forget that whatever you ask of the Father, I will be right there to see that it is granted to you. (6)

Later on in Mark's gospel, Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me." (7) That is what I would call the mother of all volunteer activities. How in the world would you have the strength to do that? I think we need to abide by the rule of the heart: work, then rest. Do all you can, and trust God with the outcome. Pray. If you've forgotten how to pray, you at least remember the words of the Lord's Prayer. How about learning the words of four or five Psalms? Repeat them to yourself as you are sitting quietly in the morning or before the day comes to a close.

You don't have to save the world; God's in charge of that. What you and I can do is to do our part. I love the little poem of Emily Dickinson:

"If I can keep one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one heart its aching,
Or cool one pain;
Or place one fallen robin
Back in its nest again,
I shall not live in vain."

I watched a lot of pelicans on the beach in South Carolina last week. I watched how they had the good sense to expend energy when necessary, but then allowed themselves to ride on the currents of the air whenever they could. Friends, the grace of God is the air that holds you up. The strength of God lies deep within you. It is my prayer for you, for our nation and for our anxious world that the peace of Christ, which passes all human understanding, will keep us all safe and hopeful, until the Lord comes again.

(1) Adam Gopnik, "Bumping into Charlie Ravioli," *The New Yorker*, September, 2002, p. 80-84.

(2) As quoted in *Context*, November 15, 2002.

(3) *The Active Life*, Harper & Row, 1990.

(4) Cullen Murphy, *Are we Rome? The Fall of the Empire and the Fate of America*, as quoted in *Context*.

(5) Colossians 1: 15-17.

(6) John 14: 25ff. and 16:23.

(7) Mark 8:34.