

**“Vital Signs: Curing Spiritual Vertigo”**

**Matthew 5:1-16**

**April 27, 2008**

**GR FUMC**

One morning, in November of 1994, Neil Rudenstine overslept. It was cause for alarm. Mr. Rudenstine was an important man, a busy man; he didn't have time to oversleep. He was in the midst of a million-dollar-a-day fundraising campaign; he was a zealous perfectionist; he was the president of Harvard University. Oversleeping that morning was a hint of things to come: “after years of intensive, nonstop toil and struggle, in an atmosphere that rewarded frantic busyness and overwork, having been assaulted by a hail of never-finished tasks, President Rudenstine [finally] collapsed.” “Only after a 3-month sabbatical, during which he read his favorite authors, listened to his favorite music and walked with his wife on a Caribbean beach, was Rudenstine able to return to his post. That week, his picture was on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine beside the one-word banner headline: ‘Exhausted!’” (Wayne Mueller, *Sabbath*, pp. 3-4)

Unless we have an incognito guest with us this morning, you and I do not lead the high-profile lives of Ivy League university presidents. But just because we're not on magazine covers doesn't mean that we aren't exhausted. The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, whose quote we read before the Pastoral Prayer this morning, described her working life this way:

“Sixty-hour weeks were normal, hovering closer to eighty during the holidays. The to-do list was never done. Walking outside of whatever building I had been in, I was often surprised by how warm the night was, or how cold. I was

so immersed in indoor human dramas that I regularly lost track of the seasons. When a fresh breeze lifted the hairs on my neck, I had to stop and think, Does that wind signal the end of spring or the beginning of autumn? What month is this? What year, for that matter?" (Taylor, p. 4)

Sound familiar? Recently, I've been reading and learning about the human brain. When our lives become out of balance, disconnected from nature and each other, when duties and tasks absorb all our time and energy, when we need, but do not get, rest in order to replenish our spirits – our brains start to operate in "survival" mode. The left brain, which is in charge of *action* takes over; the right brain, in charge of long-term vision and creative thought, goes into retreat. The imbalance in our lives is reflected in an imbalance between the hemispheres of our brain.

With the left brain in charge, we jump to conclusions, we speak and act without thinking. When faced with a situation we don't understand immediately, we make things up, usually assuming the worst. A flattened cardboard box in the middle of the road becomes a dead dog. A critical comment at work becomes a personal insult. The out-of-balance, left-brain-only life is comparable to a motorcycle being driven at high speed, for which "even a small stone in the road is a deadly threat. When we're moving faster and faster, every encounter, every detail inflates in importance, seeming more urgent than it really is." (Mueller, 5)

John Wesley, the "Founding Father" of the Methodist Movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, might not appear, at first glance, to be the one to turn to for advice on living a balanced life. Wesley was a demanding, highly disciplined, over-achiever

who lived on little sleep, plain food and cold showers...and thought others should do the same. He was not known for his gentleness or his good humor. He didn't marry until a late age, and then he did so because it seemed to be the practical thing to do. (Needless to say, after living together for only a short period, the Rev. and Mrs. Wesley lived out the rest of their lives in separate quarters.)

But when you dig deeper into Wesley's life you find that, in fact, he knew a lot about balance. From the very beginning of his career, he understood the connection between physical, mental and spiritual health. Wesley's first publication was *Primitive Physic*, the equivalent of a modern medical self-help book. He recommended regular exercise, plenty of fresh air, and a diet of fresh vegetables. He invented his own exercise equipment for those winter days when he couldn't go out horseback riding. He spent an hour alone every morning in prayer, and that was before he led the daily service of Morning Prayer. He received Holy Communion several times each week. In an era of short lifespans, he lived into his nineties.

The holy life, John Wesley wrote, is comprised of a balance between works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety are those acts that allow God to feed you: worship, prayer, Bible study. Works of mercy are those acts of sharing what you have received: caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner, feeding the hungry. Everyone needs a balance of nourishment and mission, receiving and giving, rest and work.

This morning we read from the Gospel of Matthew, one of its best-known sections known as "The Beatitudes," the blessings. (We're going to be hearing quite

a bit about the Beatitudes in upcoming months. What we're hearing today is just a preview. Our Confirmation students will be talking about them on Confirmation Sunday in May. Over the summer, we'll be looking at them in greater detail in our summer sermon series. If you attended Jazz Vespers two Saturdays ago, you heard them then. By late August, they may have sunk in enough that we'll have them memorized!)

The Beatitudes comprise the opening chapter of Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. They are the introduction to Jesus' most complete description of God's kingdom, his word-picture of the Christian vision. The Beatitudes are not just a vision of life after death, as it's so easy to assume. They are also a vision of the sort of life Christ hopes and intends that we lead here on earth. They describe what is important to God, and what is important to us, when we are at our best. Listen, as I read them again, using Eugene Peterson's translation called *The Message*. Listen for the balance between *being* and *doing* that Jesus says is the way of life that God intends for us:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, you who are at the ends of your ropes. With less of you there is more of God.
- Blessed are those who mourn, you who have lost what is most dear to you. Now you can be embraced by the One most dear to you.
- Blessed are the meek, you who are content with just who you are—no more, no less. Now you can find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, you who have worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

- **Blessed are the merciful, you who care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.**
- **Blessed are the pure in heart, you who have gotten your inside world put right. Now you can see God in the outside world.**
- **Blessed are the peacemakers, you who show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.**
- **Blessed are the persecuted, you whose commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.**

**God desires meekness and spiritual poverty, so that we can receive what God gives; but God also calls us to act on our commitment, even if we anger others. God wants us to get our own lives put right, *and* calls us to act as peacemakers so that the life of the world is put right. These aren't contradictions, these are the two ends of the balancing pole that keep us upright on high wire act of life. These are the cure for the spiritual vertigo that causes us to tumble off in one direction or another.**

**Life is a balancing act for each one of us. But life is also a balancing act for the church. What's true for us as individuals is true for us as communities of faith. We post- Enlightenment people think in terms of the individual. We simply assume that the blessings Jesus is offering are directed towards the individual listeners seated around him. But the first century was part of the era of group-think: identity was a group thing, action was a group thing; faithfulness was a group thing. When Jesus spoke of God's Kingdom, he meant a state of existence that God intended for everyone, the poor and the rich, the powerful and the weak, the living and the dead. He meant a place and time where God's will is done... in heaven *and* on earth.**

**John Wesley was not Jesus (sometimes Methodists get them confused), but he knew that just as individual lives needed to be balanced, so did the life of the church. In his own time and place, the established state church, the Church of England, was out of balance: heavy on the receiving end, short on the giving end. So Wesley's reform movement emphasized mission: prison reform, orphanages, the abolition of the slave trade. At their meeting house in London, the Methodists provided free medical service, daily meals and a revolving loan fund for start-up businesses. Wesley recognized that the staid, placid life of the church as he knew it needed to be balanced with action on behalf of the poor.**

**The poor are still with us and action is still needed. But we live in a different world than either 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine or 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Most of us suffer from a lack of balance, from the dizziness of spiritual vertigo, not because we're staid and placid, but because we're so busy running around doing that we don't know how to stop and simply be.**

**In their studies of healthy churches, both Dan Dick, author of the *Vital Signs* book that we're using for this sermon series, and Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity For the Rest of Us*, a similar analysis, come to the conclusion that healthy churches – like healthy people – know how to balance the doing with the being, the giving with the receiving, the mission with the worship, the works of mercy with works of piety. A teenager in one of the vital churches that Dick studied offered this image for the balance of acts of mercy and piety; “It's like breathing. Acts of piety are inhaling; acts of mercy are exhaling. They go together. People**

may ask which is most important, but the answer is, ‘It depends on which you did last.’” (Dick, 90)

Vital congregations have learned that if they’re going to “breath out nourishment for others” they had better learn how to “breath in spiritual nourishment for themselves.” They focus inward to grow in faith themselves, they focus outward to grow faith in others. One indicator of this balance is that healthy, growing churches are comfortable with silence. In worship and small groups of all different types and sizes, silence is used to balance the noise of the world.

And it is a noisy world we live in: airplanes, traffic, televisions, radios, cell phones, the constant hum of technology. In fact we even try to block out noise with more noise, as we plug into our iPods and MP3 players. And there are many church growth specialists who advocate putting our addiction to noise to good use in our worship services: the more activity, the more loud music, the more overhead speakers, the better they say. From this perspective, silence is boring, an evangelism turnoff. (Bass, 119)

But, says Bass, in the strong, growing, effective churches she visited, silence, meditation, and contemplation were commonplace. She “witnessed Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists and Congregationalists practicing silence at board meetings, prayer meetings, Bible studies, pastoral care sessions, labyrinth walks, yoga classes and discernment groups. In some congregations, [she] watched small children in their Sunday School classrooms sit – for a few seconds at least – in God’s stillness. All these mainline Protestants,” she says, who are “known for their earnest activity,

are finding God in silence as if they were seasoned monastics or practicing Quakers.” (Bass 119)

We don't do too badly here at First Church when it comes to silence. We try to incorporate silence into most of our Sunday morning services, and recently we moved from 30 to 45 seconds of it. I know that sounds short, but I hear from other pastors that even 10 seconds is difficult. In the first congregation I ever served, silence was specifically banned in worship. We were on the radio, and it was considered “dead time.” If you attend our monthly Taizé services, you know that we sit together in silence for 5 minutes. But what about our meetings, our activities, our study groups? How well do we balance our need to talk with each other with our need to listen together (to God)?

Brother David Steindl-Rast tells this story of learning to keep silence regularly:

All over my native Austria the chorus of Angelus bells rises from every church steeply, at dawn, at high noon, and again before dark in the evening. At school one day – I was a first-grader then – I happened to stand by an open window on the top floor looking down on the school campus. It was noon. Classes had just finished and everywhere children and teachers came streaming out onto the courts and walkways. From so high up, the sight reminded me of an anthill on a hot summer day. Just then, the Angelus bell rang out from the church and at once all those busy feet down there stood still. We had been taught to recite the Angelus prayer in silence: “The angel of the Lord brought the message to Mary...” Then, the ringing slowed down; one last stroke of a bell and the anthill was swarming again.

Now, so many years later, I still keep that moment of silence at noon. Bells or no bells, I pray the Angelus. I let the silence drop like a pebble right into the middle of my day and send its ripples out over its surface in ever-widening circles. That is the Angelus for me; the Now of eternity rippling through time.

**Silence is not the cure for all the forms of spiritual vertigo in the world, but it is one place to start. It is one way to balance our acts of mercy with an act of piety; it is one way to even out our exhaling with our inhaling, it is one way to prevent exhaustion. I invite you to find ways to incorporate silence into your daily life, both alone and in the company of others, and especially when you are about God's work. I invite you to do that now.**

## References

**Wayne Mueller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. Bantam Books, 1999**

**Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*. HarperSanFrancisco: 2006.**

**Dan Dick, *Vital Signs: A Pathway To Congregational Wholeness*. Discipleship Resources: 2007.**

**Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*. HarperCollins: 2006.**