



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

The Essential Balance

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56ⁱ

This past week while Mary Lu and Don and our youth were working hard on the mission project down at the Mexican border, Mary Jane Kolar, Carl Noble, and I were working hard in Dallas, trying to absorb the ins and outs of the new Stephen series lay caring ministry we are beginning here at UCC. One evening, Mary Lu called to see if we could help out with a concern that had developed at their ministry site, and more than once I felt that we needed help in Dallas, as at times the pace of the information incoming was just overwhelming!

And with “overwhelming” on my mind, I suppose it isn’t strange that the story of the Pony Express popped into consciousness. As you may know, next year we’ll celebrate the 150th year since the Pony Express was founded.... and the following year we’ll celebrate the 150th anniversary of its demise. Though it was a fantastic idea, it had no staying power.

For just a year and half in the Wild West, mail was dispatched across this country from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California by a relay system known as the Pony Express. Occasionally an express rider would be attacked by the Native Americans, but because his big mount was stronger and faster than the

native's ponies, the rider could spur his horse to a gallop and outrun his attackers before his horse would tire. This scenario wasn't repeated too many times before the natives changed their plan of attack. Realizing they couldn't outrun the express rider, they wisely stationed some of their number every few miles along the route. Then, just when the rider had outrun the first group of attackers, the second band would appear, causing him to spur his horse on without rest. This tactic was repeated until at last the rider's horse would collapse from exhaustion.

Admit it now, you are in the company of friends. Don't you sometimes feel that you are like one of those Pony Express horses. We get one crisis resolved and here comes another. If it is not a child in trouble at school, it's a plumbing fixture busted and making a pool out of the bathroom. If it is not an unhappy client, it is an aging relative's pleading for your attention, or the desperate feeling of waiting to find your next job while you are unemployed. One stressful thing after another, in a go-go non-stop life that seems to have no reasonable balance.

Balance? "There is no such thing as work -- life balance," said former General Electric chief executive officer Jack Welch recently in a speech to the Society for Human Resource Management. "there are our work -- life choices and you make them, and they have consequences." Jack Welch as well attended, taht all across the Internet reactions to his statement were pilloried especially on those websites where people share their nonstop lifestyle, their never ending to do lists, their pitiable life pace.

As the Friday Wall Street Journal reported, the challenge of finding the work life balance is now an official cultural preoccupation, the subject of regular websites, blogs and newspaper columns. In fact, the Wall Street Journal has

jumped into this work-life analysis with a blog entitled, *The Juggle*. “The Juggle examines the choices and tradeoffs people make as they juggle work and family.”ⁱⁱ

Every once in a while even the overly self-conscious recording of one’s trials and tribulations has to break out of its seriousness with a joke:

A woman opened her refrigerator and saw a rabbit sitting on one of the shelves.

"What are you doing in there?" she asked.

The rabbit replied: "This refrigerator is a Westinghouse, isn't it?"

To which the lady replied "Yes."

"Well," the rabbit said, "I'm westing." ⁱⁱⁱ

Resting, indeed. But as the Journal reported, the work-life balance is much like the Loch Ness monster -- there lots of sightings but it seems that no one has ever found it.

Jesus knew it was important for people to get away from time to time. His disciples had been out preaching and teaching and healing and ministering to the public. And it was Jesus who suggested that they get away from the crowds for a while and rest. He said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." So many people were coming and going that they scarcely had time to eat. So, Mark tells us, they left by boat for a quieter spot.

And even though the people found them on the side, and even though their rest was fleeting, indeed, it is perfectly clear that what Jesus envisioned for his disciples was a healthy rhythm, *an essential balance* :

of teaching and listening,

of working and of resting,

of actively seeking the guidance of God and of simply relaxing into that Spirit of wholeness and holiness, always closer than our next heartbeat.

We were created for balance. God worked six days and he rested on the seventh, but we think we don't need rest?

My father used to mutter a maxim when declining a second helping of tempting foods, saying, "All things in moderation..." and he was quite healthy in those eating habits. But when it came to work and rest, Dad lived and breathed his workaholic ministry of surgical healing. Rest? He slept through great portions of our family vacations, his body just needing some catch up time.

Paradoxically you might say, my father, who was best known in our town for his medical gifts and skills, probably found the best balance in his life when he retired from his medical practice. For 14 years after retirement, he volunteered working in the local clinic for indigent folks. In that phase he worked, but he also shared meal times with my mother once again, a luxury not known often when actively employed. He had time to telephone his grandchildren. There were many more of those big, broad grins on his face as he sat in the living room and looked upon the riches of family.

It was only recently I discovered the likely source of Dad's maxim on moderation was the Jewish Talmud's^{iv} proscriptions, like Buddhism's Eightfold Path for the Spiritually Noble, both paths like the Christian one that recognizes the best blessing comes to those who balance better the engagements of life.

Yes, as followers of Christ it is important for us to realize that Jesus advocated that balance in life too. Christianity has always been an activist faith in which the emphasis has been on taking up one's cross and following; laying down one's life; active, humble service in the cause of Christ. And certainly, that is a major part of our faith. And for most of us, the challenge to action is the more demanding one.

But for all Christians at some times, and perhaps for you now, there is another important word. You see, Jesus never meant for us to be so involved in doing for others that we neglect our own long run need for leisure, for rest, for family, for friends. As Vance Havner used to say: "If we don't come apart, we'll come apart!"

One of the reasons we gather for worship here each week is to rest and to refresh of our spirits. We need this time and place focus our attention on God's presence in our lives. For all of us this is an important time, but for some of us it is absolutely essential. It is the key to our balance.

I'll be frank with you. I believe that for every person of faith, every stage of life brings its own challenges that are either met well and lead to further growth, or are met poorly and cause us to either slip backward, or to barely hold our ground. The tensions between all these pairs of possibility is dynamic.... And only a living, vital relationship with God can possibly guide one through.

The good news in our family yesterday is that last night our daughter Marie called to say that her boyfriend Sean proposed to her yesterday morning. She told us that she accepted and that they are engaged to be married sometime next year after Sean returns from his tour of duty as an army officer in Iraq. After Sean leaves in mid-August, Marie will become a graduate student in Library Science at

the U. of North Carolina. But because of their pledge to marry, each to the other, their lives have entered a new stage with new and different challenges to find that wholesome balance. One of their temptations will be to look so completely to each other these days that they forget their lives have a wider challenge, to not only grow in love for each other, but also to grow in love with God, to grow in service to others, to grow in commitment to Christ's mission on earth.

And what about you? If you are a student, you may have time to develop your devotional life, but be short when it comes to serving others in tangible ways in Jesus' name.

Are you in mid-life, with plenty of good energy for your occupation, but you are skimping on quality family time, and perhaps skimping even more on the developing of your relationship with God.

Or are you in what society calls retirement. You know, the Bible doesn't confer retirement on any of us as long as we have breath. All of us are to serve others, All of us are to celebrate and deepen our relationships with others. All of us to search within us and in the community of the faithful for a strong experience of the presence and guidance of God. We never retire from these.

And where are you in on this continuum of challenges in your life? Each of us is, like Marie and Sean, by the nature of your position in life and the special temptations and opportunities within it, have an opportunity to witness to our faith in God by how you respond to the circumstances that life offers you.

Will you commit this morning to aiming for that essential, that vital, that faithful balance.... That alone will provide you that deep satisfaction of knowing

that you heard the call of God at this time in your very particular, gifted life... and you said, "Yes, Lord, I see your leading...and I will follow?"

May it be so!

Amen.

ⁱ Mk 6:30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

Mk 6: 53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

ⁱⁱ <http://blogs.wsj.com/juggle/>

ⁱⁱⁱ **Balancing Act** by King Duncan

^{iv}"**Talmud and Midrash.**" Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Deluxe Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.

"The Talmud devoted considerable attention to the maintenance of good health, regarding it a religious duty. A keen understanding of the importance of hygiene in preventing illness was reflected in an emphasis upon bodily cleanliness. **The rabbis also stressed the necessity for moderation in eating and drinking and the importance of a proper diet.** The Talmud prescribed remedies for illnesses and mentioned surgical techniques, such as cesarean section.

Religious concerns surrounding the calendar, prohibitions against planting seeds of different kinds together, dietary laws, and Sabbath-walking limits resulted in an intense rabbinical interest in astronomy, zoology, mathematics, and geometry."