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An adaptable, flexible ministry

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Jul. 1, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Are you a planner? Do you set an agenda for your day? Is your BlackBerry or iPhone programmed to alert you to upcoming appointments? Do you make lists that help structure your time and order your priorities?

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 1:13-15, 23-24
Psalm 30
2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15
Mark 5:21-43

Most of us do approach life with a desire for order and yearn for a sense of accomplishment. Of course, this can be very beneficial, unless such a penchant for scheduling weakens our ability to be flexible, or if it diminishes our willingness to be engaged by the unexpected. When we value adhering to a schedule more than we value the needs of others, then God?s good people are ill-served.

In this regard, Henri Nouwen once shared an experience of his own (?Time Enough to Minister,? *Leadership*, Spring 1982). Pressed by the demands of teaching at Yale and feeling overwhelmed, Nouwen decided to take a prayer sabbatical at the Trappist Abbey of the Genesee in New York. His ?schedule? would consist solely of prayer -- no teaching, no counseling, just prayer. On his second day there, a group of students from a nearby school approached him and requested that he give them a retreat. Nouwen complained to the abbot, ?I came here to get away from that type of thing. These students have asked for five meditations -- an enormous amount of work and preparation. I don?t want to do it. Why should I spend my sabbatical time preparing all those things??

?Prepare?? the abbot asked. ?You?ve been a Christian for 40 years and a priest for 20 and all these students want is to be a part of your life in God for just a little while.?

What the abbot knew and what Nouwen learned is that disciples of Jesus are called to live in a constant state of being prepared, so that when someone who is drowning comes into our world, we are ready to reach out and help. That?s ministering.

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus came among us with an agenda: He came to announce the reign of God. He came to invite sinners to repent and to believe the good news of salvation. He came to reveal God?s love, mercy and forgiveness to all, and he did this with a sense of urgency and purpose. But when he was called to digress from his daily agenda, he did. By allowing himself to be flexible to the needs that took him from his plotted course of action, Jesus accepted the will of God for him and for those to whom he ministered.

In today?s Gospel, Mark picks up his verbal portrait of Jesus immediately after the healing of a man possessed by demons. A large crowd has gathered, and it would seem an opportune time to develop the man?s cure into a teachable moment. However, at the request of a synagogue official named Jairus, Jesus willingly puts his plans on hold and sees to the man?s need. Then, en route to Jairus? home, Jesus is approached by yet another who desires his help. A woman who suffers from a malady that renders her ritually unclean and isolated from society touches him and is healed. Instead of continuing on, Jesus chooses to make her experience public and to cite her faith as the impetus for her healing. Then, Jesus resumes his ?schedule,? and, despite the news that Jairus? daughter has died, he urges Jairus to let his faith supplant his fear and proceeds to raise the girl to life.

In his willingness to set the needs of others before his own plans and desires, Jesus remains the example for every minister. Had Jesus insisted on keeping to his own agenda, the lives of many people would have been quite different. He could have told Jairus and the woman to make an appointment. He could have insisted that his agenda did not allow for distractions such as these. However, Jesus knew that in healing the bold woman of faith and raising Jairus? daughter he was preaching a powerful and persuasive Gospel ... all because he was flexible enough to take the time to do so.

In a song written for his son Sean (?Darling Boy,? on the album ?Double Fantasy,? 1980), the late John Lennon said, ?Life is what happens to you while you?re busy making other plans.? The same could be said of ministry.

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