

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 8, 2009

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“Take a Number”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39



Patience is really a virtue when you're waiting for a table in a crowded restaurant, especially when you're hungry. Waiting in restaurants can take on a variety of forms. Some require only that you submit your name and the number in your party and they'll call you when your table is ready. Some, in addition, provide you with one of those vibrating gizmos that moves and lights up when your table is ready. Some suggest that you wait in the lounge, and I've noticed over the years that this suggestion is made sometimes when there is no wait at all. Deli counters and some busy bakeries suggest you take a number.

Some waits are more agonizing than others, depending on the degree of hunger and the waiting procedure of the establishment. I find that the deli counter take-a-number procedure is best for managing expectations and reducing angst. You know your own number and you know the number currently being served, so it's a matter of simple subtraction to estimate when your turn will come. And you can feel quite comfortable that the numbers will be called in numerical order.

Restaurants are a little different, and I think a couple of factors come into play when managing expectations there. One is that the host or hostess may reveal the estimated waiting time upon your arrival, and if they're smart, they over-estimate that time, so that when you're called, it's much quicker than you expected. *“That wasn't bad!”* I also find that it helps not to be able to see the current diners. I learned this recently when my husband Doug and I visited a highly recommended homemade pasta restaurant in a neighboring town with a very small, compact dining room in full view of the waiting crowd. We were able to see who was at the salad stage – forget that table for awhile, who was in the midst of their entrée, who was on dessert – a lot of hope there, and who was mulling over the check – that one would be any minute now!

But this estimation technique is complicated by where exactly in the line you are situated. And you never really know whether you're next or not. You can get a general sense by observing who was there when you arrived and who came after you, but you may be a party of 2 or 4, and the 6 who came in after you may get seated before you. Or vice versa.

This became obvious at this compact pasta restaurant when the party crowded up next to us in the small aisle between the kitchen and the dining room started to mistrust the hostess in

charge of the waiting list. Have you ever done that? I have. “Oh, she must have skipped over us. What name did you give? Maybe they called us and we didn’t hear. They came in way after us! Maybe you’d better go up and check.” Invariably, you have not been called, or there are many parties of 2 ahead of you, and so on; my experience is that mistakes in this realm of the hostess waiting list are few and far between. The lesson in restaurant waiting is simply this: submit and trust and you will be called.

In imagining the crowded scene outside Simon Peter’s door the night of Jesus’ visit there – “the whole city” we’re told – I wonder about the people who were waiting to be healed, hungry for wholeness. The gospel reads that “they”, presumably Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, the first four disciples called by Jesus, “they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.” What was the attitude of those outside lined up or crowded around or peering in? As the night wore on, did they become impatient? Tired? Skeptical? Excited? Did they look around at each other: leprosy, malnutrition, demonic possession and wonder who would be called next? Would they have to wait all night? Could they gauge how quickly Jesus was healing each one?

They did not know enough about him and who he was to trust. Their neighbors Simon and Andrew probably told them that he had arrived and healed Simon’s mother-in-law just that afternoon. Took her by the hand and lifted her up and then the fever left her. Just that day he had been in the synagogue “teaching with authority” and had cast out an unclean spirit right there and then. Will this be worth the wait? It’s really late; does he know the rest of us are still out here? Should someone go in and check?

It appears from this passage that perhaps Jesus did not get to the whole city’s worth of diseases and demons that night, because the next morning they’re after him again. We witness the first misunderstanding and doubt on the part of the disciples about whether or not and how Jesus is doing his job, as they perceive it. We read that while Jesus slipped away to pray, “Simon and his companions hunted for him.” “Everyone is searching for you.”

It is helpful here to understand that during Jesus’ time, disease was believed to have evil as its source. The night described here portrays Jesus healing symptoms of evil in one patient at a time. The public health practitioner in me wonders if Jesus went out to pray early the next morning, wondering to God, I could be just here in this village for weeks, maybe months! Much like the doctor who sees an endless stream of patients with the same symptoms until she begins to wonder about the water quality: instead of treating each patient one at a time, let’s fix the water! And then through prayer and re-centering in the early morning, perhaps remembering the bigger picture, Jesus replies to his searching disciples: *Let’s go on so that I can proclaim the message in other towns also; for that is what I came out to do. The kingdom of heaven is near. Repent, turn around. Love one another.* And he goes on to do both: teaching how to turn away from evil to prevent its possession in the first place and casting out evil each time he encounters it.

The gospel of Mark is characterized by several things, but one of them is the device used by the author highlighting the secrecy of the identity of Jesus to all in the story except the reader. As readers, we know right away who Jesus is – Mark tells us “the beginning of the

good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”— but all through the narrative, the disciples are scratching their heads, the clamoring crowds don’t get it. At first, only the demons know who he is. But we do. We do as readers of the gospel and we do as Christians today living and benefiting from Jesus’ Resurrection. Hindsight is 20-20 and so should be our trust in him. But it’s still hard.

Long before the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, Isaiah writes to remind the exiled Israelites in our other scripture passage this morning: *Have you not known? Have you not heard? Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. Even the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. Those who wait and trust will find strength.*

Our waiting for a restaurant table when we’re hungry is the least of it, isn’t it? We hunger for so much, just as the people outside Simon’s door hungered and waited for Jesus’ healing touch. We hunger for physical health and financial security. We hunger for love and acceptance and affirmation. We hunger for peace in our world and a solid future for our children and our grandchildren. In the early morning in the dark alone we hunger for a God who will lift us up, whose presence will assure us that all is well.

And we wonder how long we have to wait, yet, Isaiah writes this morning God’s understanding is unsearchable. Throughout the Bible we are reminded that God’s time is not our time. God’s understanding is unsearchable. And have we not noticed that when we do submit and trust in a God who, no, we cannot understand, but who we do know from the teaching and healing and ultimate death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, loves us beyond our comprehension, that, indeed, we feel our strength renew, peace returns to our souls and we feel full again. Healed, lifted up, so that we, like Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, feel the fever of worry and anxiety leave us.

The good news, my friends, is that we don’t have to give in to impatience and mistrust when it comes to the events or the non-events in our lives. With God, there is no need to take a number. Jesus does know we’re out there. We won’t be skipped over. Our reservation is guaranteed. We have already been called. Your table is ready. Amen.

