

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mark: 1: 29 – 39

There is a story from the middle ages about a poor farmer whose plow one day hit an iron box that was buried in his field. When he opened up this box, he found inside a scroll which gave directions to a fantastic treasure. It said that on a certain part of the beach on the shore of the Black Sea there was a magic pebble. If you rubbed this pebble against any kind of metal it would turn that metal into gold. Now this pebble looked like every other pebble, but you could identify it by touch. If you picked up the other pebbles, they would be cold. But the magic pebble would be warm.

Now this story seemed unreliable, but the farmer believed in it. He sold all that he had and moved to the shore of the Black Sea. He began his search for this great treasure. There were of course millions of pebbles on the beach, and it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. But he began resolutely. He would pick up a pebble. If it was cold (and therefore not the magic one), he would hurl the pebble into the sea. Then he would then pick up the next pebble. He followed this pattern hour and hour, day after day, and year after year. Pick up the pebble. It is cold. Throw it into the sea. Pick up the next pebble. He never gave up. He kept trying until one day, a rather ordinary day, he picked up a pebble and it was warm. Then, in sheer force of habit, he threw it into the sea.

You see, even when we are looking for the most valuable thing in life, the patterns in our life do not always help us. Even when we are searching for our ultimate treasure, the habits we set up sometimes can trip us up.

If we have children, we want to be good parents. So, we set up patterns in our life to achieve that end. We place our children in the best schools.

We encourage them to become involved in all kinds of activities, in basketball and football, piano lessons and soccer. We fill up our calendar with all of these good things.

Soon the patterns take over. Our life becomes going from one event to the next, driving from here to there, all with the best intentions.

We know the importance of friends and relationships. So, we reach out to others. We want to interact with them. We meet new people and set up plans. Before we know it, every night is filled with some social activity: bowling or a movie or a dinner or a party. Our social events begin to take over our calendar, all with the highest goals in mind.

We know that we have to support ourselves and our family and plan for the future. So, we dedicate ourselves to our work. We work hard and we look for a way of advancement. We take on extra responsibilities and extra hours. Perhaps we even take on a second job. Before we know it, it is the work that is guiding all that we do, all for the most noble of goals.

We set up patterns in our life to help us and they do help us. But they also have the possibility of taking over. Instead of helping us, they can begin to dictate to us. In that sense, sometimes the most valuable and important things are hindered by the very patterns we set up to attain them.

Jesus gives us another example. Jesus certainly had high goals in his ministry. He strove to do his Father's will. He set up patterns in his life to achieve it: a pattern of teaching, a pattern of healing, and a pattern of proclaiming the gospel.

Those patterns helped him and made him successful. Mark is very specific about this in today's gospel. Jesus' teaching, his healing, and his message attracted crowds so that soon the whole town was at his door.

But Jesus also recognized that the patterns that he had set up in his life had to be evaluated. So early in the morning he went to a deserted place to pray.

He went in order to assess whether the things that were filling his time were all as they should be. He went to reassert his authority over the patterns of his life. In that prayer he discerned that his teaching and healing needed to continue, but they had to continue in a new way and in different places. His patterns had to be reformed and redirected.

Obviously, what we are called to do is follow the example of Jesus. We must reassert our authority over the patterns of our lives so that they are helping us rather than dictating to us.

We are called to follow Jesus' example and to ask ourselves, has my relationship with a spouse or a friend fallen into a routine? Do we keep doing what we have always done and never stop to ask ourselves are we really communicating? Are we really allowing our relationship to deepen?

We have to ask ourselves is our calendar on automatic control? Do we just fill up one thing after another without ever stopping to ask what is important and what is not? Do we let the flow of life pull us along without ever asking what is in our heart and what is God calling us to do?

We are called to assert our authority over the patterns of our lives and that can be done in simple ways. We can take a few minutes each morning to draw back as Jesus did and ask what is important? What is God calling me to do?

We can schedule a dinner with a spouse or a friend to ask what needs to change in our relationship? What is truly important? Perhaps once a month we can schedule an hour of time to ourselves when we can stand before the Lord and ask, what is God's will? Am I really living the life I need to live?

The habits in our life move us along. They fill up our days. But we are called to make sure they are moving us in the right direction.

We should not be like the poor farmer whose habit to find his treasure caused him to throw his treasure away. We must not let the habits of our life keep us from the life God is asking us to live.

AMEN.