

July 19

Overwhelmed By Need

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I hear these refrains from parents. *We eat in our van more than we eat in our house. By the time I get home, my kids are already in bed. I don't know how I would ever get to sit down or get anything done if my kids didn't spend so much time playing video games.*

I saw a mother with two preschoolers in the grocery store the other day. A two-year old was riding in the basket seat and a four year old who had been drinking Red Bull was in constant motion. He would pull something off the shelf, and his mom would say, stop that or you're going to make me mad. Then he would try to climb up into the basket and his mom would say, stop that or you're going to make me mad. Then he would run up and down the aisle and his mom would say, you better stop, I'm getting mad. And he kept going and she kept getting more frazzled. And the two year old was just taking it all in, learning the game from her older brother; the game called push mommy till she explodes.

Living the pace of our culture is like being a worn out waiter carrying too many plates. There's going to be a crash, sooner or later. But it's not just parents who are overwhelmed.

I read an article recently about the leadership crisis in non-profit organizations. Non-profit leaders must raise money, supervise staff and ministry and address ever increasing needs from the public. As demand rises, personal and organizational resources often fall. Many of these leaders are so engaged in their work that the only way they can survive is to step down. They are, in a word, **overwhelmed**.

Not only are moms, dads, employees and leaders being overwhelmed by demand, our financial system has been overwhelmed. Our court systems are overwhelmed. Our Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security systems will be overwhelmed. Healthcare and military can be overwhelmed.

The psychological community is reporting to us that modern life is getting more and more hectic and demanding and that this is taking a huge mental and emotional toll on our citizens. The medical community is telling us that the majority of cases they are treating are directly related to stress. All the while, we have consumed billions of dollars in products designed to make life easier. We should get a refund. We're still overwhelmed.

Describing a scene in the third decade of the first century, Mark the gospel writer says there were so many people and needs pressing them, Jesus and his disciples didn't even have time to eat. Everywhere they went, throngs of people would come to them for healing or blessing or teaching. And while they ministered to all they could, the disciples would get to the point of being overwhelmed. In our text today, we see Jesus pulling them away from the crowds so they could be alone to rest.

V. 31... *Jesus 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.*

Maybe we're supposed to be overwhelmed by need when we follow Jesus.

Here's a distinction, however. Scripture doesn't say anything positive about burning personal candles at both ends until you burn out. Much of our stress comes from the schedules and activities we choose for ourselves, and our kids. This may be more virus than virtue.

Being exhausted from ministry, on the other hand, is a sign that you're doing something right. In our text today, the disciples are overwhelmed by the demands of serving others. Jesus doesn't tell them to *suck it up*. He tells them to slip away and rest. The work is **overwhelming**. So, if we're not overwhelmed by the needs of others in our community, we're doing something wrong.

Why are over 80% of churches in the US plateaued or declining. Why are over 3000 closing their doors every year? Could it be that we stopped being overwhelmed and decided to be manageable instead?

Could it be that we became so comfortable in our church buildings that we stopped being out where people are hurting, losing, fighting and dying? Could it be that we expend our energy managing our organization instead of going out with Jesus into the masses? In our desire to avoid being overwhelmed at church, have we become so safe and predictable that really just boring, out of touch and irrelevant to the kingdom?

The great irony in this would be that most churches in America are overwhelmed nonetheless. But instead of being exhausted from blessing others, too many Christians are overwhelmed by petty conflicts and personal choices. At least doing the work of Jesus overwhelms us with greater meaning. If we aren't overwhelmed by ministry, we just aren't doing it right.

If we are truly being a church on mission, we will be **overwhelmed by the task of shaping children—teaching them, loving them, guiding them**. That means, we must reinvent religious education in the church. If we are going to prepare our children for the future they face, the safe and predictable status quo must go.

We will need a strong, trained and committed faculty. One of the myths we must burst is the one that says we can give our kids a good religious education with our leftover time and effort. Adults teach children. No curriculum can do that job for us. And no curriculum can make the work easy. If it's easy, we're not doing it right.

Teachers who shape children have to meet and plan so they are prepared. They have to invest in their students beyond one hour a week. They have to model a life of faith outside the classroom. Of course, if these teachers make the necessary sacrifice, they must be supported by all of us. Great religious education will be overwhelming or mediocre. Since we're going to be overwhelmed by something, let it be something that matters eternally.

But we cannot be satisfied with a religious education for our kids. What about the majority of kids who have no religious instruction and whose general education is substandard? Public education is an overwhelmed system in large part because parents have abdicated their responsibility. Many parents who are very engaged in their kid's education have pulled out of public schools. Many parents with kids in public schools do little or nothing to invest in their schools. So everyone in the process is overwhelmed.

We are losing the battle for the mind and we're losing it before kids turn 12. If we aren't overwhelmed by sharing the gospel and training up children in the way they should go, we aren't doing ministry as Jesus taught us.

If we are going to do church right, we are also going to be **overwhelmed by healthcare and wellness**. I know that Washington is working on this, so we have nothing to worry about. But just in case our leaders and all the interest groups wallow in their juices and make matters worse, we should have a plan B. We are the plan B.

What wore out Jesus and the disciples, according to our text, was their ministry of making people well. Healing was the dominant feature of Jesus' ministry because if people are sick or disabled, they are limited in how much they can work, care for a family or live life. The church used to be at the forefront of healthcare, building hospitals and sending medical missionaries. But we have abdicated this work to others. It's overwhelming.

It doesn't matter that we're not all nurses or physicians. While some in the church need to be involved in treatment, any of us can be involved in prevention. Much of our sickness is

due to risky and preventable behaviors and lifestyles. We put things into our bodies for pleasure that make us overweight and more susceptible to disease. We experiment with sex and expose ourselves to unwanted pregnancy and disease. We have met the wellness enemy and it is us.

The church isn't a substitute for a good physician or medication, but we should be on the front lines of lifestyle and spiritual wholeness. We have resources of the mind and emotion that are critical to physical well-being. We have boundaries of behavior that we can model for others. We need to live healthy lifestyles and help others to do the same. And if this work isn't overwhelming, we aren't doing it right.

There's another way we will be up to our elbows in alligators if we follow Jesus, and that is by promoting justice for the poor. Let's start with unemployment and underemployment. Jesus said that he came to preach good news to the poor and liberty to those who are captive. If you've never lost a job or had trouble finding a job, you can't imagine the desperation. How will I feed my family? How will I pay the rent? How will I buy medicine? When people cannot work and provide for themselves, they sink into despair; they lose their dignity; everything piles up against them.

Most people don't need charity. They need work. They need training. They need encouragement. They need childcare. They need another chance. We might not be able to provide training in some fields, but we could help people learn to live on a budget. We could help them learn to garden and cook healthier foods. We could help them find other resources that are available. We could help them keep going when they are overwhelmed.

Do you know how many people in our community need this justice, kindness and mercy? If they all gathered together it would be the same kind of crowd that pressed upon Jesus and the disciples. They would overwhelm us if we did what Jesus did, and that's as it should be.

One of the most impressive followers of Jesus I ever met was **Mildred McWorter**. As a single woman, she moved into inner-city Houston Texas to work with children in the toughest neighborhood imaginable. She was a large woman and larger than life. Hearing her stories would make the hair on your neck stand up and your pulse quicken. She had kids who pulled knives on her; kids who cursed her and wrote graffiti on her community center; even a drive by shooting. She faced every challenge you can name and more. Many times, she came close to walking away.

But she stayed and earned the respect of her neighbors. There was no ministry or effort she would not attempt. She had a tutoring program, a mentoring program, GED programs, job training, recreation programs and of course, worship and bible study. She would tell story after story about the kids who went on to college or who got decent jobs and some who even started their own businesses. When you heard her describe these things and the kids that were impacted, it inspired you and exhausted you.

She came to speak at a pastors' conference I attended and someone asked how she could manage the pressures. She said, *you don't manage this kind of ministry. It's not like running a bank or a grocery. It doesn't happen in an office. It's messy and unpredictable. If I tried to stay on top of it, I'd die. If I tried to understand it, I'd go crazy.* Mildred served Jesus in an overwhelmed world and it overwhelmed her. She was doing it right.

There are many famous last words, ***Are you sure the power is off; What does this button do; This doesn't taste right; The odds of that happening are a million to one.*** The last words of the church are, *let's keep it manageable.*

And *that's the way it is*, but not the way it can be.