

Serve! Retreat! Serve! Repeat!

A sermon based on Mark 1:29-39.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to ask for a show of hands, but who here is sick of all this? You don't know what this is, do you?

Who's sick of all this darkness, cold, snow...winter. Or, at least, who here is tired or worn out or getting worn down by all of this? I guess I can't be one to complain since I was in Hawaii during the worst of it.

I was at pastors' conference a couple of weeks ago, and like always, someone made the comment to me, "I don't know how you can do it (the cold, the darkness, the long winter)." I'm sure you've gotten that from people as well. And for me, my response typically is, "as long as I see some green grass here, then I'm good to go." There's just something about that, mentally for me, knowing that it still exists, even here, that's it's hiding out under all that snow, lying dormant now, but just waiting for a few months before it's going to poke its head out again...to me, that's refreshing and re-energizing....it's enough to pick me up and get me going again and really get me through the rest of winter here.

What does it take for you to power through this (or maybe you're one who doesn't need that pick-me-up in the winter)? The "happy" lights? Getting Outside for a week or two? Binge-watching Netflix? Getting more involved in the community? During these winter months, what refreshes and re-energizes you to not only get up in the morning (which can be hard enough), but also to go about your daily tasks, and maybe even to do them with a smile on your face and on your heart?

What does it take for you to power through this...this life, living the way God wants you to? What not only motivates you to serve Jesus and others, but also, what refreshes and re-energizes you to want and to be eager to do that, and to do it with a smile on your face and on your heart? Because, like a cold, long winter, trying to live for Jesus all the time, the effort, doing it intentionally, it can drag us down. So, what do you do? What can you do? What can you do better?

Today, Jesus lives and gives us a great formula to follow. It's real simple. Serve! Retreat! Serve! Repeat! As you strive to live the way God wants you to and to serve the way God wants you to, you too can find solace, peace, rest in Jesus, in prayer, in his Word. And as we retreat in Christ, we find true meaning for our lives and we are filled with motivation and energy to keep serving.

Serve! Retreat! Serve! Repeat! Now, that's a formula of life Jesus knew well, and our verses today are a great example of it. Skim through them again. Everything that happened here was right on the heels of last week's events, Jesus teaching in the synagogue, then driving out a demon. It was that same day (in fact, "as soon as they left the synagogue") that Jesus went over to Peter's in-laws. And mother-in-law was sick in bed, so Jesus took her by the hand, and the fever left her.

And then the floodgates opened. Everyone in Capernaum brought their sick and demon-possessed to Jesus, and he healed them all. Pretty awesome! I'm sure, it was also pretty tiring, too, for Jesus.

And where you or I might take a day off or at the very least sleep in way past the alarm the next morning, where was Jesus? Up, at a solitary place, before dawn, taking a few moments for himself, praying to God, getting his batteries recharged.

And when the disciples found him, he was raring to go: ***“Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”*** In other words, let’s get going. I’m ready to get back to doing what I’ve come here to do...preach the gospel.

Do you see it? Serve – healing and driving out demons (helping people in their physical needs). Retreat – taking the time to pray to God. Serve – let’s get out there and preach some more (and help people in their spiritual needs). And it’s a process Jesus would repeat and carry out over and over again.

But do you understand why Jesus did that...why he kept up such a frenzied, crazy-busy schedule? If you read the gospel of Mark, you might notice his emphasis in many of his accounts is on the miracles Jesus performed...how Jesus showed himself to be God...the Almighty. But I wonder if verse 38 is maybe one of the most important verses of the entire book because that summarizes Jesus’ purpose in coming here.

Although Jesus performed many great miracles, he did not come primarily as a miracle worker. Although he healed many sick people, he wasn’t primarily a healer. Although he cast out many demons, he didn’t come primarily as an exorcist. No, Jesus’ mission was to redeem the world, to seek and to save what was lost...to share the message of eternal life through him. That’s why he came.

Now, why have you come? Not to church this morning, but here, in this life. For what purpose has God put you here? Don’t think too hard or too long. Here’s what God says your purpose is in his Word: ***“You are a chosen people...a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” “You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”*** Or, to summarize, God has put you here to serve, just like Jesus did, to help people in their physical needs, and to share Jesus (the gospel), to serve people’s greatest need.

Ultimately, all of that is how we serve God. And this is a 24 hour, 7 days a week job...to selflessly and repeatedly serve God and others. How’s it going?

If I can be honest with you, for me, not good. I mean, I get it, putting Jesus and others ahead of myself, always looking for ways I can help people around me with my actions or my words, I get that. The issue is the follow-through, the repeatedly doing that. And here’s why. Serving God and others continually is tiring.

It’s wearing, not so much physically, but mentally and emotionally, to have the visit or the phone call with the worship delinquent or the person who’s mad about something that’s going on at church and you feel like a failure because the delinquent gave you the same bunch of excuses they did last month when you called and it’s not looking like there’ll be any change anytime soon or because the member railed on you as if you were the cause of the problem and weren’t enough of the solution, though you had nothing to do with it and the issue shouldn’t be a big deal but it is...it’s hard not to have moments where you are mentally drained from the serving you do and you begin to second-guess yourself or why you’re even doing this at all.

And I know I’m not alone. Listening to gossip around the water cooler at work and biting your tongue because you so badly want to join in or getting the courage loosen your tongue so you can stand up and defend the reputation of whoever they’re talking about...it can get tiresome.

Being expected by God to practice patience when it seems your children didn't get the message the first five times you told them to stop doing what they're doing...it's hard not to just blow up at them and maybe say some things you'd turn red in the face if God were standing right next to you (which he is).

The relationship goes sour after you put so much effort into making things right. The goal you had been spending so much time, working so hard towards achieving, and now, it's not going to come to fruition. You are the person who will drop whatever you're doing to help a friend, to shovel their driveway, pick them up when their car breaks down and they're stranded, cover their bill when you go out to eat because they forgot their wallet at home, again...and you don't get so much as a thank you or even an "I owe you for this." Or, you're the one who's there for every event at church, looking for ways to help out, while others sit on the sidelines. Serving Jesus and others, it wears you down, doesn't it?

I understand that. I've been there, too. But if I can be honest again, the real, the REAL reason why I don't repeatedly serve God and others, and why I'm not always excited to serve...I'm sinful. You are, too. And you know what our sinful nature does with these opportunities to serve? It makes it all about us, right? What's in this for me? What am I going to get out of it?

And our sinful nature is real subtle about it...makes that mindset almost second nature to us. "Church work day on Saturday morning, but that's the only day I get to sleep in, I can go a little later...oh, it's already noon; they're probably finishing up right now. I'll get there next time." "I know this friend is going through a rough time and I want to be there for them, but I also know I'll spend all my time listening to them gripe and complain, and it's always an emotional drain on me, and I don't need to go to that place. I have to think about me, so it's easy to say I'm busy or to just not pick up the phone when I see it's them."

Friends, do you see it? And this isn't even touching on serving others by giving them the good news of the gospel, which is so important, too. But Jesus says, "Serve," and we, by our words and our actions, say, "I'd like to, but it's too tiring for me or I'm not getting anything out of it," and we don't. And, we sin.

Have you forgotten why you're here? Thank God Jesus didn't. Hear his words again, "**Let us go somewhere else...so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.**" Jesus came for you. Jesus preached a message of salvation for you. Jesus made it all about you. His life, his death, his resurrection...all about you.

His life of perfect service...obeying God's will without tripping up or sinning...keeping up that crazy, hectic schedule of constantly looking for ways to serve others' needs...that was in your place, because we haven't given that perfect, constant, selfless service to God.

But that life of perfect service became ours when Jesus died on the cross and exchanged his service for our sinfulness and did away with our sins for good.

And Jesus' service to God and us ended with his resurrection, to make sure that you and I aren't being taken care of in this life alone, but that we are set for eternity. He rose to life so you and I will rise to life in heaven.

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many," Jesus once said. And he did, for you and me through his life, death, and resurrection.

Serve! Retreat! Serve! Repeat! You might notice there's one aspect here I haven't talked about yet, and that's the "Retreat." You can imagine having the weight of the mission of winning salvation for the whole world on his shoulders must have been taxing for Jesus. Even he needed those moments of solitude, where it was just him and God in prayer, where he could his batteries recharged. Look, even before he died, in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see him praying to God, getting the strength to go on.

Serve, serve, serve, repeat! That can get tiring. Where can you get strength from God to do that? How can you "retreat"?

Have you ever been on a work retreat before? You know what's beneficial about them? You have some time off of work, away from the daily grind, with the hopes that you're doing some team-building, maybe opening the door for some great, unforced ideas to be born. But ultimately, it's a time to recharge your batteries so you can continue to perform at a high level at your job.

Friends, don't run yourself into those dangers we talked about earlier by not taking the time in your life of service to God and others to get recharged. Let God's house be your retreat. Let this be a place where you are growing together spiritually with your other "teammates." Let this be a place where you can find solitude by being able to go to God in prayer. Let me recharge your batteries with the only thing that can give us the strength and energy we need to keep serving...God's Word.

And, with that, we're ready to go. Notice, here, how Peter's mother-in-law gets the point of Jesus' help immediately: she has been saved to serve. And she does it immediately. Jesus' love and salvation spurs us to service. And now we go!

I have to tell you, after conference the other week, my retreat, I was raring to go, with a bunch of new ideas and a renewed zeal to serve Jesus and you. But at the same time, I had to reign myself in. If you're like me, you might know why. Sometimes, you set too many goals or you set them way too high and then look at how daunting that list is, and you don't even start.

So, this past week, I sat down, looked at the large list of what I wanted to accomplish, and I said "5 things." I can do five things and do them well.

You've been saved by Jesus. You've been energized his Word. You've been commanded to serve. The world is your opportunity. But start with one thing. Maybe it's looking for a way I can encourage a different co-worker every day. Or what's one thing I'm going to do around the house this week to take a little load off my spouse and show him/her I love them? Maybe it can be here at church, for all the times I've said or thought "no" to helping out, this time, I'm going to say "yes."

And if you're having trouble doing this, serving, think about these two things What service has Jesus done for you? Why are you doing this? It's not about me. It's all in love and thanks to Jesus' selfless service for me.

Serve! Retreat! Serve! Repeat! A simple formula. An awesome opportunity from our loving God to serve him and others? Are you tired of it? Retreat to Jesus...and repeat. And in him, you'll find the pick-me-up...the motivation, the energy, and the zeal to serve...and repeat. God's strength and blessings as you gladly go and serve him and others...the reason you're here! Amen.