

*First Things First* – Mark 1:29-39

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This past Monday, I got a call from a long-time acquaintance named Randy. Randy was the vice president of the college I attended as an undergrad. I worked for the college after graduation for a couple years before I went to seminary. And Randy and I, along with our friend, Mark, who also worked at the college, would go to the gym together after work. (This was thirty years ago now.)

We'd work out at the gym together and then reward ourselves by going to the local Pizza Hut for a thin and crispy pepperoni and sausage pizza. It sort of defeated the purpose of the workout, but it tasted good. We shared stories and the laughs they brought.

At that point in my life, I was in my mid-twenties and these guys were in their forties and fifties. And so, frankly, my attention was more so on my future—what my career would entail and the next steps up the ladder. I treated those nights at the gym and the pizza afterward almost as an afterthought. Fun, but not the most important thing I had going on.

Our friend, Mark, ever since then, always calls us on our birthdays—namely as a way to stay in touch. And it just so happened that Randy had just had a birthday this week and Mark called him. And that somehow prompted Randy to give me a call.

We had a great conversation. And it prompted me to reflect on how, if you work at it, meaningful relationships can last in our lifetimes while the other things we think are more important in the moment either fade away entirely or don't live up to their billing.

We all make a series of decisions throughout our lives regarding our careers, where we're going to live, and how we're going to spend our time when we're not working. And we make these decisions, we think, to better our lives.

Sometimes, though, those decisions come at the expense of what you learn later is more important—like the relationships we either tend to or don't.

Conversations like I had this week with Randy tend to help one focus on the fundamentals of life. When a friend you hadn't heard from in a while but you've known for decades reaches out to you, it puts into perspective what's important. Wrestling with what you'll make for dinner that night or when you're going to get all of that laundry done, or the next task at work doesn't seem to be quite as important all of a sudden.

You do, in those situations, realize what is important and take steps to address those matters first.

"What's more important?" we should ask ourselves. And often our answers to that question will help dictate the outcome of a situation—our success or our overall peace and joy.

Jesus is a prime example of someone who always seemed to have his priorities straight. And that is no more evident than in where we find him today in Mark 1.

He was a busy guy by this time. His popularity was growing. He had been on a rigorous schedule of healing those around him who were sick, including Simon's mother-in-law who had been in bed with a fever. Surely, he was exhausted but yet motivated from his work of curing those who were ill or casting out demons.

The next morning when it was still dark, with a full itinerary of more work ahead, Jesus begins his day, however, by going off by himself to pray. Now with such a busy day ahead of him, he probably would have appreciated the opportunity to sleep in a little longer and get a little extra rest. The disciples traveling with him could have used some time with him to get debriefed on what would lie ahead for them that day as well.

But he sneaks off by himself. "First things first," he seemed to say. What was more important for him at that hour—more important than extra sleep or breakfast or planning—was time with God.

By the time the disciples found him and exclaimed, “Everyone is looking for you,” Jesus was ready—ready to go out and continue the hard work of proclaiming his message and casting out demons.

Before work, though, came the nurturing of an important relationship.

When it comes to our relationships—whether it be with God or someone else very important to us, today’s world more than ever before makes it easier for us to neglect them.

I preached back in the spring, I think, on the epidemic of loneliness that has swept our country, prompting the U.S. Surgeon General to declare a health emergency. Loneliness and isolation are killing us, breeding other health problems according to research.

And loneliness is somewhat fueled, at least in teenagers and young adults today, by the onslaught of social media. Platforms that are intended to bring people together are actually making us lonelier and more isolated. We don’t take the time to, instead, use our phones to actually call somebody and have a meaningful conversation.

First things first, Jesus says to us in Mark 1. He took time to nurture the relationship that was most important to him. And his example is a model for how we can be diligent in taking care of those relationships we profess to hold dear.

Jesus nurtured his relationship with his heavenly Father through prayer. He got up early, went off by himself, and conversed with the Lord. He sat, maybe he spoke, but he no doubt listened in silence and contemplated the ways of his heavenly Father.

There is no better way to begin or end one’s day than being in intentional relationship with somebody important to you—whether God or somebody else—through sitting, speaking a little, and listening a lot. It centers us, grounds us, and connects us to that entity, who then enables us to find greater meaning and peace in our lives.

Regarding our relationship with God, many of us struggle in our prayer life because we feel we have a difficult time coming up

with the right words to say. To be authentic, we feel, our prayer must be spontaneous. And if we can't come up with the words, we must not be good at connecting with God.

But nobody ever said that our prayers only had to be our own words. We can pray the great prayers of others and in the process nurture a relationship that we value deeply.

Take Jonah in the Old Testament. After he was thrown into the sea and swallowed up by the great fish, he found himself in a difficult spot. And in that moment of crisis, he prayed. But he didn't take time to come up with his own words. No, he prayed the words of the psalms: "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to thee, into thy holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee."

In the midst of crisis, first things first, Jonah nurtured his relationship with the Lord and used the familiar words of the psalms to make it happen. Prayer, which we often suppose is truest when most spontaneous, shows up in Jonah when he is in the rawest condition imaginable.

So too can we use prayers we have learned or prayers of others and tend to the one relationship that will make all others more whole.

I join you in your struggle of connecting to God and nurturing that relationship. It's hard, and it takes discipline. Like nurturing any relationship, our connecting with God requires us to make an effort. We must be intentional about it.

It has been said more than once that if we find ourselves right with God, we are more likely to find ourselves right with the significant people in our lives. And that rightness only comes when we are intentional about seeking God out. When we do, it becomes easier to take an approach of, "First things first."

In Harry Chapin's song, *The Cat's in the Cradle*, a father is always just about to be there for his son, but never quite makes it. At various stages of his childhood and teenage years, the son asks,

“When're you coming home, Dad?” Each time the father replies, “I don't know when. But we'll get together then.”

Misplaced priorities. And the song shows it. For when the father is finally ready and eager to spend time with his son, the son has learned how not to be there for his father. Thus, when the father asks his adult son, “When're you coming home, son?” his son replies, “I don't know when. But we'll get together then.”

In our busyness, in our crises, in our downtime, what comes first? Our work will always be there, our chores will always remain. But if our relationships with God and each other don't become and remain first, lasting joy and lasting peace will always escape us.

Jesus never seemed to find it hard to make his relationships his first priority. Maybe we'll never perfect it, but maybe with a little more commitment, we can be better at it.