

Finding Your Spiritual GPS By Bruce Epperly

“I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” Julia confessed. “For the past seven years, I’ve careened through Advent and Christmas, flying by the seat of my pants, trying to visit all the shut-ins, prepare for worship, go to church parties, and preach a knockout Christmas Eve sermon, only to get sick on Christmas Day. This can’t go on. I want to enjoy Christmas next year. I want to remember the holidays and spend time with my family rather than racing non-stop toward the Christmas Eve finish line. I feel pulled in a million directions and can’t seem to find my way.”

Julia’s litany of stress and sickness is repeated in thousands of ministerial households across North America. The holiest times of the Christian year – Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter – are often times of hurry and anxiety rather than reflection and prayer. We lose our way and forget what’s important when we place everyone else’s spiritual lives ahead of our own.

Stress and busyness are signs of faithful ministry for many pastors. At ministerial gatherings, it is commonplace to hear pastors complain of long hours, inability to take time off, the impact of their work family life, and the loss of overall well-being. Pastors often vie with one another for being the most stressed-out or brag about how many family activities they miss as a result of the demands of ministry. A calm, non-anxious pastor, who takes time for rest, recreation, study, and family, is often viewed as a slacker, who is unwilling to commit everything to the cause of Christ.

In contrast, I believe that both stressful and healthy ministerial lifestyles are a matter of choice. Faithful excellence in ministry is often as much a result of discovering a healthy and effective ministerial style as long hours and multitasking. It involves the discovery that we have many vocations, not just our pastoral vocation, and need to set our spiritual course on a day to day and weekly basis. Healthy ministry is grounded in finding your spiritual GPS, a spiritual center that enables you to discern the important from the unimportant, prioritize activities, balance action and contemplation, and relationships and work. Jesus regularly needed to check His spiritual GPS through times of contemplation and solitude.

Matthew 4:31-42 describes a “day in the life” of Jesus. He teaches, heals, casts out demons, eats with colleagues, and goes to a lonely place for prayer. The passage ends with townsfolk anxiously searching for Jesus in hopes that they can compel Him to stay in Capernaum as resident teacher and healer. Jesus, however, surprises them by saying He needs to move on: “I must proclaim the kingdom of God to other towns also, for I was sent for this purpose.” (Matthew 4:43) Jesus had a vision that enabled Him to navigate the many demands of ministry.

When I invited a group of pastors to reflect on this passage in the spirit of *lectio divina*, prayerfully identifying the words or images that particularly “spoke” to their spiritual state, Evan noted, “I have trouble dealing with the conflicting demands of my congregation and family. I need to find a quiet place to discern what’s important and how I should proceed.” Susan added, “I felt like I was a ship without a rudder until I began the practice of daily prayer and meditation. I don’t always get it right, but I now remember my true calling as a pastor, parent, and partner

more often, and am able to get back on track more easily after difficult weeks at church or home.”

I believe that Jesus needed to take time for stillness to experience the rest of placing His life in God’s care and rediscover His priorities. Perhaps Jesus was tempted by the adulation inspired by His success as a teacher and healer to stay in Capernaum. He needed to still every voice but God’s voice speaking within His own experience to discern the next steps of His journey. Jesus needed to realign His spiritual GPS.

Jesus’ commitment to solitude provides one model for faithful excellence and well-being in ministry. After a busy day, filled with multiple interactions, Jesus finds a solitary place for prayer and meditation. Even extroverted pastors need moments of quiet reflection. An activist pastor, Kathy, admits that without thirty minutes for journaling each morning, she is rudderless throughout the day. “The journaling gives me time to see what’s important, chart my day, and adapt flexibly when I need to change course.” Mark’s gospel notes explicitly that Jesus was praying in solitude. While there is no one formula for prayer, suitable to all persons, the pattern I practice most days involves saying a brief prayer of gratitude upon rising, taking about twenty minutes for meditative prayer, and then looking at my schedule for the day. As I go over my schedule, I assess my sense of physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness to help me discern if I have too much or too little planned or if I need to spend more time in study or in activity.

Throughout the day, I recheck my spiritual GPS and renew my energy by taking a few prayerful breaths upon arrival at my study, pausing for a moment of prayer before going to a meeting or pastoral visit, and taking a moment to breathe deeply when shifting from one pastoral task to another. This practice enables me to see if I’m on track with today’s vocation or if I need to change course to be faithful to my spiritual, relational, emotional, and professional well-being.

Healthy ministry is a choice, resulting from our commitment to practices of prayerful solitude. God’s wisdom is always a moment away and when we pause to notice God’s movements in our lives, we will discern the direction we need to go and discover the energy to be faithful to each day’s calling.

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