Sunday, July 31, 1977
BURNOUT: THE RESULT OF CARING TOO MUCH!
Mark 1:32-39

Police officers are subject to it! Psychiatrists, physicians, social workers, prison guards, welfare workers, psychologists, teachers, nurses, volunteer church workers, retail salesclerks, clergy and many others also succumb to it! What is it that is happening to many of these people? They are burning out emotionally.

Our society's emotional landscape is littered with "burn-outs." It can happen to anyone. According to a researcher who is presently studying "burnout," "The waste of training and talent in many professions because of burnout is staggering. It's destructive to the people, to the professions and to society." Burnout sometimes results in more serious trouble such as alcoholism, divorce, mental illness, low productivity, and high absenteeism.

What is burnout? When you burn out, your emotional center goes. There's not much you really care about. A burned-out person has mostly negative attitudes. One's concern for persons goes down. People who suffer from burnout don't like the others they work with. If you're burned out, you find yourself fatigued by people. You're worn out from having to interact with people all the time. Those who are burned out become crabby and short-tempered.

Sound familiar? Of course, it does to anyone who has been put off by a busy doctor, or put down by a surly police officer, or put on hold by a go-by-the-book bureaucrat. It's familiar to anyone who has been given the cold shoulder by someone when they wanted a shoulder to cry on.

Burnout often happens to people who care too much. It can happen to almost anyone, but it occurs most often in people for whom caring for and helping other people is the main part of their vocation or avocation. It happens to people who do volunteer work in the church or who are busy in some other organization.

Perhaps you've had the experience somewhere along the line. You've worked hard in an organization; made dozens of phone calls to try to get others to help out. You've tried and tried and then you got just plain tired from dealing with all those people and the more you worked the more burned up and burned out you became.

Or you might have had one of several other reactions. Because those who suffer most from burnout often had the noblest intentions and the greatest expectations, their feelings of failure and inadequacy are also the greatest. Thus, sometimes those who have experienced burnout see themselves as the primary cause of the problem. The burned-out person may say to himself or herself: "I'm no good at this. I'm a failure. I don't have the skills to deal with other people."

Another typical reaction to burnout is the classic one of blaming others. As some people burn out, they begin to justify it by saying to themselves: "These people are not like me. They don't care about anything or anyone. They're uncooperative, lazy, and have no sense of responsibility. Why should I keep batting my head against a stonewall? I'm going to quit this organization or this job. Nobody appreciates me anyway."

Some burnouts happen to persons not only because they care too much but because they are caring for the wrong reasons. As we noted in the sermon last week, in an effort to overcome our loneliness and separation, some people get heavily involved in various organizations. They are involved not only because they care but because they need other people and need to be helping others most of the time in an attempt to coverup their own loneliness. They work very hard, too hard, and are soon burned out and quit.

The striking fact about burnout is that it is nothing new. Jesus Christ knew its dangers. He got worn out by people's demands on him. He got tired of his disciples'questions. He often found himself tired and in need of rest and refreshment. Jesus also knew how to avoid burnout before it became serious, and he showed his disciples how to do the same thing. Our scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel of Mark touches on this problem.

The fame of Jesus had spread throughout the countryside. All kinds of people were making demands on him. Mark describes it this way: "That evening at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons. And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him, followed him, and they found him and said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' And Jesus said, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also.'"

Here we begin to see how Jesus avoided burnout and we also begin to find some clues for us.

1. Note first that Jesus· knew when it was time to stop and get away by himself. Even though everyone was searching for him, he knew when to quit. In fact, he made getting away to a lonely pace for prayer a regular habit in his life. He knew that without this he would be burned out completely and not able to be of much help to anyone.

Now he could've said to himself, "There are so many sick people, so many people who need my help that I just don't have time to stop and rest and pray." Some of us tell ourselves things like tha.t. In fact, we are living. in a culture and social climate which places a great and positive emphasis on presence; so much so that we feel that being present is a value as such and is always better than being absent.

Always being present is a big problem for those of us who are ministers and it may be your problem too. However, we ministers like to think that we need always to be present to people who are ill, or who have problems. And then we have to be present at meetings, social groups, committees, parties, dinners and just present almost everywhere.

But we are reminded by the life and ministry of Jesus, that although this ministry of presence is undoubtedly very meaningful, it always needs to be balanced by a ministry of absence. Henri Nouwen, who has become my spiritual counselor through his writings, notes that such a ministry of absence has some specific implications. It calls for the art of leaving, for the ability to be articulately absent and most of all for knowing when and how to make a creative withdrawal.

It's not always easy to know when to be present and when to withdraw and be absent. It's difficult for us admit that our presence cannot satisfy everything that needs to be satisfied for ourselves or for others. Furthermore, sometimes our continued presence can even be a block to God's Spirit, and it can be a block to the person we are trying to help. We are in danger

sometimes of no longer being the way, but of being in the way; of no longer speaking and acting in God's name, but in our name; of no longer pointing to the Lord who sustains but only to our own distracting personality.

Any one of us can become so available that there is too much presence and too little absence and we become burned out as well as not being of any help to others. No doubt much of this having to be present all the time is connected with a certain illusion of indispensability.

I'm not trying to build a religious argument for a game of golf or a trip to Las Vegas, or a cruise to the Caribbean. Those things of course could be very nice. But what we are talking about here is creative withdrawal, absence; for thought, meditation, prayer, whatever you want to call it. This is important, not only for ministers, but for each one of you, no matter what your vocation or volunteer work may be.

As far as ministers are concerned, Henri Nouwen in one of his books asks: "How would it sound when the question, 'Can I speak to the minister?' is not answered by, 'I'm sorry, he has someone in his office,' but by, 'I'm sorry, he is praying.'"

When our absence from people means a special presence with God, then that absence becomes a sustaining absence. Jesus regularly left his disciples and the people to whom he was ministering to enter into prayer with God. Perhaps we need to schedule our time with God with the same realism that we schedule our time with people. Then, too, we would avoid burnout.

2. A second aspect of the way in which Jesus avoided burnout is the way in which Jesus practiced "detached concern." Detached concern means that we do not become overly emotionally involved with the person's problems whom we are trying to help. To become overly involved is part of the syndrome of caring too much.

Detached concern means that we are careful lest our presence become a suffocating presence so that we are always hovering around the person, always available and being too ready to take over and manage that person's life when what he or she really needs is to take some responsibility for herself. Detached concern means maintaining at times a sense. of distance. It means giving the person we are trying to help space and room to grow on his or her own.

Many of us also probably need to have a "detached concern" about our jobs. If all one does, night and day, is think, think and work at one's vocation, then burnout will occur sooner rather than later.

Detached concern, a sense of distance, so that we do not care too much, can be helped a great deal by a sense of humor. The person who does not practice detached concern is the one who is always serious and never able to laugh, especially at himself or herself. It's the person who takes his own self and his own feeling of being indispensable too seriously. All of us need large doses of humor in our lives.

Humor gives us a sense of distance. In humor we take a step or two back and look at ourselves, at our pretensions and laugh. Sometimes someone else has to do this for us.

Humor and comedy are related to our Christian faith. Humor reminds us that the world and everything we do are important, but not ultimately so. Like the clown, the person of faith can

laugh at the pretense of anyone who thinks he or she is so important because we know that no matter how important someone thinks he or she is, one day that person will return to the dust the same as we.

Humor as part of our faith is like the comic tradition in the theater. Thornton Wilder once said that the comic tradition in the theater carries the intention of exposing folly and curbing excess. “Humor and humility are closely related. A sense of distance, a sense of humor, are all part of detached concern which can keep us from burning out.”

3. A third aspect of the way in which Jesus avoided burnout, was his knov1ledge that in this world, nothing is eternal. All things ultimately go away. Too often we burn out ourselves for things which are not eternal. Only God is eternal! Therefore, Jesus knew that if he was to have strength, he had to get that strength from the only eternal source-God.

We often try to avoid solving our burnouts in other ways. We forget that no friend, no lover, no husband or wife, no community or organization, no noble cause, will finally be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness. And by burdening others with these divine expectations, we not only get burned out, but disillusioned and disappointed as well. Soon we find ourselves accusing others of not caring enough while we ourselves are caring too much.

It is only when we are able to look beyond the boundaries of human togetherness and anchor our lives in God, the source of all intimacy, that we are able to avoid or recover from our burnouts. Amen.