

## **“Jesus, Pressured Jesus”**

Mark 3:7-19 (NRSV)

I’ve chosen the title for this sermon, **“Jesus, Pressured Jesus”** -- a parody of a favourite old gospel song entitled, **“Jesus, Precious Jesus”** -- to underline **the perpetual pressures that Jesus faced in his ministry**. The pressure in Jesus’ life came from at least two sources: first, his popularity with the people (Mk. 1:22, 27; 13:34). After the spectacular way in which he’d begun his ministry, there surely would’ve been **pressure from the crowds** for him to continue to meet ever-increasing expectations. And, second, there was **a pressure that emanated from his repeated collisions with the religious establishment**. They were always placing him under intense scrutiny: any indiscretion, any false step, and the game would be up.

Mark has already made us aware that the **Pharisees considered Jesus to be guilty of blasphemy** after he forgave the paralytic’s sins. Next, Mark tells us that **the Pharisees were scandalized with Jesus’ association** with a low-life, tax collector like Levi. If he was such a good teacher, “Why,” they wondered, “didn’t Jesus practice the usual, traditional ceremonial laws?” Moreover, Mark tells us that **the Pharisees observed Jesus and his disciples doing things differently on the Sabbath**. Instead of upholding the law, as they defined it and as any decent rabbi would practice it, they concluded Jesus was nothing more than a pious law-breaker and a fraud. So the holier-than-thou, separatist Pharisees muttered to anyone who would listen about their observations and conclusions, and they even formed an unholy alliance with the impious, worldly Herodians to plot Jesus’ extinction (Mk. 3:6).

**The pressure upon Jesus was immense**. Our Lord’s every move, night and day, was observed by friend and foe alike. Increasingly, the enemies of Jesus placed the worst interpretation on everything they saw and heard. Our Lord, being truly human, must have felt the pain of these unrealistic expectations, harsh judgments and growing hatred with increasing emotional discomfort and desire to distance himself from his critics. So he withdrew from Capernaum “to the sea” where he thought he might be less vulnerable to the pressure and strategies of the crowds and the critics. But the move had only limited success because of his immense popularity.

### **1. The demands of popularity (Mark 3:7-12).**

Mark tells us,

Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him, hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea [and], Jerusalem [to the south], Idumea, beyond the Jordan [to the east], and the region around Tyre and Sidon [to the west] (3:7-8).

**Talk about pressure!** When you and I go to the beach for a break, a common enough practice for us as well as for Jesus, the last thing you want is for **people to follow you around with their camcorders**, videoing all your actions, and **asking you for some latest word of wisdom**, ready to text the precious phrases to someone else on their blackberries. But **the Galileans wouldn't be denied**. There was "a great multitude" of them. After all, they'd heard and seen what Jesus could say and do – how his words had comforted and challenged people, how his willingness to be wherever people hung out had lifted people's spirits, and how his miraculous healings had made a difference in people's lives. And **the folk from the south, and the east and the west, well, somehow they too, had heard about Jesus**. The crowd kept getting larger. It was a massive response.

There were hordes followed by hordes, wave upon wave of needy people – **all demanding attention**. It was kind of like how people today follow movie stars, or famous political figures, around. Perhaps they were just looking for Jesus' autograph, or perhaps they just wanted to get close to him, to be able to say that they saw him. You know how it goes. In any case, **so great was the pressure of the people that Jesus "told his disciples [his only security detail] to have a boat ready for him ... so that they would not crush him"** (3:9). I think one of the disciples, probably Peter, must have hovered close by the seashore in a small boat (much the same way we might keep a car at hand with the engine running) in case Jesus needed to get further away. Knowing the apostle, Peter was probably rowing the boat officiously and formidably "staring down" the multitude.

**Our Lord's primary motivation at this time was to preach the gospel of the kingdom**, including the necessity of repentance and belief (1:14-15). Physical healing was only secondary. **But the truth is**, that as is common with people of every era, **Jesus' words had little attraction for the crowds**. What they wanted to see and experience were healings and other miracles that would benefit them or their families and friends personally.

Jesus experienced a **similar thing** after feeding the 5,000, when a vast multitude pursued him around the perimeter of the lake. To them he sadly said, “You are looking for me, not because you saw [spiritual] signs, but because you ate your [physical] fill of the loaves” (Jn. 6:26).

**Our Lord wouldn’t allow anything, not even popularity and “success,” to divert him from his primary ministry.** Unfortunately, that isn’t always the same for us, even in church. Success and popularity bring the crowds. Then keeping the crowds becomes all-important, so we do whatever keeps it happening. I’ve seen this, right here in Abbotsford, where people pack a church because of a strong and popular minister. “Circulation of the saints” is an ancient and contemporary practice. Popularity can seduce and sabotage Christian ministry.

Jesus’ was under immense pressure, and **the pressure in the largely well-meaning crowds came from two directions:** the sick and the demonized.

Verse 10 describes the **pressure from the sick:** “for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.”

Add to this the **pressure by the demonized**, as described in verse 11: “Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’” **The unclean spirits were drawn by a strange fascination to see Jesus**, even though they somehow knew he was their Conqueror, the hated “Son of God.” Years ago, a Bible expositor correctly declared, **“Terror and malice drive [such spirits] to [Jesus Christ’s] presence”** (Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, vol. 8, *St. Mark*, p. 106). For the record, **I note both Stalin’s and Hitler’s fascination with Jesus Christ but, sadly, these brutal dictators never understood nor honoured him.** These “unclean [evil] spirits – malevolent, obscene, sinister – had wrought bodily injury, psychological trauma, and immense spiritual harm to their victims – both in the bodies they inhabited and in the lives they had touched and affected. Moreover, as in the days of Christ, they thought that if they merely named the name of Christ they’d somehow have “mastery over him” (William L. Lane, *Mark*, 1975, p. 130). In response, Jesus forbade them to speak, and he cast them out.

There is tragic irony in this scene of pulsating humanity pressing around Jesus, for **the demonized** knew that Jesus was the Son of God, **but the sick**

only thought of him as a miracle-worker whom they could use for their own selfish ends (Lane, p. 129).

Putting it all together: **the ill, the feverish, the crippled** were pushing and grabbing at Jesus and falling all over him; **the demonized** were malevolently sizing him up and heckling, howling his name in furtive combat; **the jaundiced scribes and Pharisees** were watching his every move, waiting for their moment. In spite of being the incarnate Son of God, Jesus must have felt immense and inescapable stress and strain.

In that sense **Jesus Christ understands the pressures we all face**, whatever position we occupy. Here is a description of one woman's stress:

The life I have chosen as a wife and mother entrains a whole caravan of complications.... It involves food and shelter: meals, planning, marketing, bills and making ends meet in a thousand ways. It involves 'the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker,' and countless other experts to keep my ... house with its modern 'simplifications' (electricity, plumbing, refrigerator, gas-stove, ... dish-washer, radios, car and numerous other labor-saving devices) functioning properly. It involves health: doctors, dentists – appointments – medicine ... vitamins, trips to the drugstore. It involves education: spiritual, intellectual, physical, schools, school conferences, car-pools, extra trips for basket-ball or band practice; tutoring, camps, camp equipment and transportation. It involves clothes: shopping, laundry, cleaning, mending ... or finding someone else to do it. It involves friends: my husband's, my children's, my own, and endless arrangements to get together: invitations, [emails,] telephone calls, and transportation, hither and yon, [and so on].

**Anne Morrow Lindbergh**, *Gift from the Sea*, 1978, p. 25-26)

You get the picture. **It's not only the high mucky-mucks who have pressure. Ordinary folks like you and me also have pressures of various kinds** and Jesus Christ understands them. He understands **the pressured treadmill** upon which most of us run day in and out. He knows what it's like when the traffic light turns green and the car behind you immediately begins to honk. But more specifically, **he understands the pressure we feel when we try to reach out to others** as he did. He knows that when you really care about someone else, you open yourself up to troubles virtually incomprehensible to someone who doesn't care. He understands that those

who stand with him are assaulted by a demonized culture that tries to gain mastery over us. He understands the pressures of a life of faith and love.

We ought to **take great solace in this**. The more we care the busier we can become. **How did our Lord manage to deal with the pressures of life and ministry?** Whenever we feel “under it,” we need to recall what Jesus did as his ministry to the crowd multiplied: he was so pressured, he had the car running and the doors open for **a quick getaway!** Our Lord’s response gives us an unfailing model.

## 2. The Master’s management of the demands (Mark 3:13-19).

Our Lord took **three distinct steps** to manage the demands and pressures of his ministry. **The first step** came quickly enough, for Mark tells us, after a little while with the crowds, **Jesus decided he needed to be alone: “he went up the mountain ...”** (3:12a). Tradition says he ascended one of the most prominent points on the west side of the lake, but we don’t know where he went. The point is **he got away, all by himself**. The gospels make it clear that even though he was the Son of God, Jesus still needed to be alone. So do we. These times are essential to wholeness and wellbeing. As **Vance Havner** wisely said, “If we do not follow Christ’s example to ‘come apart,’ we may, indeed, just come apart!” Too many of us wake up to the sound of a clock radio, shave or do our hair to the news, drive through noisy traffic, work in the din of the office or the classroom, or other workplace, listen to the rush-hour reports on the way home, eat in front of the TV, do our household duties listening to our iPods, “relax” with the evening news on, and drift off to sleep, surrounded by the base thump, thump of some other technological device. We need silence. To use the language of the mystics, we need a sanctuary, a hermitage. It’s not that hard – a few minutes of “quiet time” somewhere in the house – perhaps with the Scriptures or in prayer -- before the family wakes up, or stopped in a parked car in the park, a walk on a hiking path, some time on the golf course, or quietly working in the garden. The pressures of life and the example of Jesus Christ demand that we do this every day for at least a few minutes, as well as during regular extended times.

Jesus got away; that was the first step. But he also took **the second step**. **Jesus prayed; “he spent the night in prayer”** (3:12b). Again the greater to lesser logic is overwhelming. If Jesus, being the eternal Son of God, had to do this to manage his pressure-filled days, how much more do we, God’s

adopted sons and daughters, need to follow his example? **Pressured people that we are** – compassionate and caring people, pushed and jostled not only by the regular demands of life, but also by the demands of the needy, the sick, even the demonized, sometimes pressured almost beyond our limits – prayer, a quiet conversation with God, is what we need the most.

Someone once asked **George MacDonald**, the famous late Victorian writer whom C. S. Lewis so admired, “If God loves us so much and knows everything we need before we ask, why must we pray?” MacDonald answered:

What if he knows prayer to be the thing we need first and foremost? What if the main object in God’s idea of prayer is the supplying of our great, our endless need – the need of himself? What if the good of all our smaller and lower needs lies in this, that they need help to drive us to God? Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other needs; prayer is the beginning of that communion, and some need is the motive of that prayer. Our wants are for the sake of our coming into communion with God, our eternal need.

(Roland Hein, ed., Creation in Christ, 1978, p. 137)

**E. Stanley Jones**, missiologist, describes the effect of prayer on us like this:

Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God. Aligned to God’s redemptive will, anything, everything can happen in character, conduct and creativity. The whole person is heightened by that prayer contact. In that contact I find health for my body, illumination for my mind, and moral and spiritual reinforcement for my soul. Prayer is a time exposure to God, so I expose myself to God for an hour and a half to two hours a day, asking less and less for things and more and more for himself.

(A Song of Ascents, 1968, p. 383)

Jesus, our pressured Jesus, knew this and spent extended time exposing his heart to that of his blessed father in heaven. No wonder God’s image was firmly imprinted on his heart and life.

**The third and final step** for our pressured Saviour was that **he shared the responsibility of his ministry with others**, as verses 13 to 19 so memorably proclaim:

[Jesus] called to him[self] those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James, son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name of Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Though the human Jesus needed his time alone, and carved it out of his impossible schedule, he also craved companions “to be with him” and to serve with him, and he was strengthened by their “imperfect sympathy and unintelligent love” (Maclaren, p. 108). If Jesus needed ordinary, sinful people to share his great work, so we also, with all our imperfection, need all kinds of other people to share the load.

Jesus “**came down [from the mountain] with them**” (3:1). **He appointed them “to be with him”** (3:17). The result was, they were now together. They had really come to know him. They had come to know one another. There was an exchange of heart and mind and soul, and ultimately a profound identification one with the other – breath for breath, emotion for emotion, word for word, will for will and act for act. We all know the story, to speak of only a few: wavering, inconsistent Simon became Peter the Rock. John and James became Boanerges, the “sons of Thunder” – dynamic apostles. Anonymous, average Andrew became the patron saint of three nations, Greece, Russia and Scotland. Loathsome Levi became Matthew, the writer of the Gospel of the Son of Man. And Thomas, the skeptic, became a tenacious disciple of faith.

Christ’s wisdom is still the same for those under the pressure of a caring life. What do we learn from Jesus, our pressured Jesus? **First, we sometimes need to get away.** We need a place alone. We need times of silence. We need time to reflect upon what’s important: like God, and those with whom we are closest. Consider this piece of poetry from Hugh Prather’s “Notes to Myself” (quoted in Tim Hansel’s When I Relax I Feel Guilty, 1981, p.19):

If I had only ... forgotten future greatness  
 And looked at the green things  
 And reached out to those around me

And smelled the air  
And ignored the forms and the self-styled obligations  
And heard the rain on my roof  
And put my arms around my loved ones]  
Perhaps it's not too late.

**Second we need to pray.** What we are in the Lord depends completely on what we receive from him. Those who are exposed to God's grace find him bringing grace into their pressured lives.

**And finally, we need to share our ministry,** to impart our lives to others. Collegial relationships defuse the pressure.

May we learn well from Jesus, our pressured Jesus.

Amen

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February 6, 2011