

SERMON TITLE: "Stressed Out by Activities? God Can Help!"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 6:30-46
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 11, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

As we kick-off our fall Sunday school and music programs today and launch headfirst into Hometown Mission Week, we're mindful of how busy everyone is. Younger folks rush to and from work and transport their children to school, sports, music lessons, scouts, orthodontist appointments, and a whole social network of birthday parties. The precious hours at home are filled to over-capacity with household chores and homework. Older people's schedules might not be quite so hectic, but who hasn't heard someone say, "Now that I'm retired, it seems like I'm busier than ever"? Retirees don't have to punch a 40-hour time card, but they're involved in all kinds of volunteer activities, exercise routines, hobbies, travel, and doctor appointments—as well as keeping up the house and yard and spending time with the grandkids. Middle-aged people are super busy too. We've been called the "sandwich generation" because we have to worry about and tend to the needs of both older and younger ones—all the while managing our own lives. It seems like, no matter who we are, we have the potential for being frustrated. Whether our to-do list consists of things we absolutely must do or things we wish we could do, it's easy for us to get stressed out about our activities.

Over the next month, I'm going to preach a sermon series on various kinds of stress that we experience, and how God can help us reduce, overcome, or cope with that anxiety. Today, I invite you to take a look at Mark, chapter 6, with me, and see how God can help us with our activity stress.

1—DO MEANINGFUL ACTIVITY

First of all, God can help us by directing us to do meaningful activity. If you look at Mark 6, verses 30 through 46, you'll notice that the activities in which the disciples were engaged weren't trivial or inconsequential. In verse 30, they were returning from a mission trip in which they had preached the

gospel, healed people of their sicknesses, and cast out demons. They had been doing significant and important work. And even when they were feeding the 5000, they weren't *just* serving a meal. They were enabling the people to stay there longer and get a better understanding of who Jesus was. They were making it possible for the crowd to hear Jesus' teaching, to witness Jesus' miracle-working, and to go home feeling more positive about their relationship with God.

Sure, the disciples were stressed. They were tired and hungry to start with, and then when they thought they were getting away by themselves to rest, they got interrupted and became even more tired and even more hungry. They were under stress—no doubt about it. But the disciples were able to cope with that stress because they knew they were doing something very important. They were helping Jesus with his mission of reaching out to new people with divine hope and healing for a better way of life.

This experience of the disciples teaches us that God can help us deal with our activity stress too. If we're occupied with trivial matters and work that isn't important to us, we won't be able to cope with very much anxiety. We'll be spread too thin for too little gain, and we'll burn out quickly. But if we focus our time and energy on activities that have high value and spiritual meaning, God will sustain us when we're tired and hungry. God doesn't want us to spend our time running around in circles, busy just to be busy, wasting our time on activities that provide no joy or purpose. That's why God directs us toward causes that make a significant difference. Doing meaningful activity goes a long way toward dealing with our activity stress.

2—BE FLEXIBLE

A second way God can help us with our activity stress is by encouraging us to be flexible. In Mark 6:30, the disciples were eagerly trying to tell Jesus about their mission trip adventures. That's what they wanted to do. That was their "Plan A." But they got interrupted by too many people. So they tried to get away by boat to a quiet place, where they could be alone. That was their "Plan B." But

the crowds ran ahead and required Jesus' attention there too. When Jesus couldn't ignore those "sheep without a shepherd," he asked his disciples to go with the flow and be patient. That was their "Plan C." Then, when Jesus' teaching went on so long that the crowd needed to be fed, the disciples had to get involved in "Plan D." Finally, Jesus sent them off by boat again, this time without him, which was "Plan E."

That reminds me of a time when I went on a mission trip to Nicaragua. In our advance training, our group leader told us over and over again that, in order to enjoy the mission trip, we had to be flexible. Whenever you try to go anywhere with a group of 10 or 12 people, there are going to be a lot of variables, delays, and changes. When you take that same group to a foreign country—especially a poor country like Nicaragua—there are going to be even more surprises. When you are serving alongside people with a different language and culture, you have to adapt to their time table, their plan, and their way of doing things. You can't expect to be in control.

The same goes for any challenging life situation. If you're too rigid, you're likely to get upset, frightened, sad, or mad. If you don't bend, you might break. That's why you have to be willing and able to change plans along the way. That's why God helps us with our activity stress by encouraging us to be flexible.

3—DIVIDE UP ACTIVITIES INTO MANAGEABLE PIECES

A third way God can help us with our activity stress is by reminding us to divide up activities into manageable pieces. Did you notice in our gospel story how Jesus divided up the problem of the hungry crowd? First, he asked the disciples to figure out what resources they had available. Then he told them to get the people to sit on the grass in groups of hundreds and fifties. Then Jesus even divided the bread and the fish. Somehow, by dividing the problem into manageable pieces, everyone got fed, and the stress was relieved.

A current-day example of this strategy is how God helped us manage this kick-off Sunday event. During this very hour, we have Shirley Valencia staffing our nursery for the babies and toddlers. Theresa Manning is teaching the preschoolers and kindergartners. Ginger DeHeer is leading the Sunday school class for early elementary kids. Brenda Boren is teaching the upper elementary children. Michelle Perry is giving spiritual direction to the youth. That's the educational piece. Music has been provided in this service by the choir members, who met on Wednesday evening to rehearse. On Friday, a group of people set up tables and chairs. Later in this service, some of the adult Sunday school members will be exiting the sanctuary a little bit early so they can set out the potluck food that many of us have prepared in advance—so we can all enjoy a nice lunch after the service. Do you see how that works? God helps us deal with activity stress by reminding us to divide up the activities into manageable pieces.

4—ALLOW GOD TO FEED YOUR SPIRIT

Now, if you're starting to think about that potluck lunch, you'll appreciate my fourth and final point. The fourth way God can help with activity stress is by feeding our spirit. When we read about Jesus feeding the 5000, we usually think mostly about God taking care of the crowd's physical need for food. And, no doubt, that was important. But the people gathered around Jesus also heard his words of teaching. Jesus fed their hearts, minds, and souls. He connected them to God. At the end of the story, we see that even Jesus himself had to go off alone for a while so he could pray and allow God to nourish and replenish his spirit.

Sometimes when we're really busy, we don't think that we have time to feed our spirits. We think we can skip our spiritual breakfast and still manage somehow. But, when we do that, we might have a day like this poem:

I got up early one morning
and rushed right into the day;
I had so much to accomplish
that I didn't have time to pray.

Problems just tumbled about me,
and heavier came each task.
"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered.
God answered, "You didn't ask."

I wanted to see joy and beauty,
but the day toiled on, gray and bleak;
I wondered why God didn't show me.
God said, "But you didn't seek."

I tried to come into God's presence;
I used all my keys at the lock.
God gently and lovingly chided,
"My child, you didn't knock."

So, when I woke up early this morning,
I paused before entering the day;
I had so much to accomplish
that I had to take time to pray. (author unknown)

We can't give out what we don't have in us. As we're hurrying from one activity to another, we need to have some spiritual depth. We need to be nourished and sustained by the enduring strength, the forgiving mercy, and the transforming power of God. If we allow God to feed our spirit through worship, small group classes, and our own personal time for Bible reading and prayer, God can help us with the stress of activities that we do and the stress of activities that we can't do. I encourage you to make a commitment to spend time with God every day. If we're willing to let God feed our spirits, it's amazing how much God can help.

CONCLUSION

Next Sunday, we'll be talking about relationship stress. I know you have a lot of activities going on that compete for your time, but I hope you'll be here. Remember, when we're feeling stressed, God can help.