

Important vs. urgent

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Not everything urgent is important. The difficulty is distinguishing between the two. In ministry, people's pressing needs seldom come before us in neat, conveniently timed packages. Instead, the minister is bombarded with legitimate requests and pleas from every side. While not everything urgent is important, some things are both--and often such needs come before us in multiples.

Mark 5 captures Jesus in the midst of such a convergence. A dying child and a sick woman each need his attention. In one instance a distressed father pleads with him to come and heal his child. In the other a distressed woman with a hemorrhage of blood slips through the crowd and touches one of the four tassels that every devout Jew wore on his outer garment. Her initial contact is not vocal but physical--a touch of last resort.

The Spirit seems to intercede on her behalf as Jesus makes a distinction between her touch and the many other touches he must have felt that day. Jesus senses the urgency of her unspoken need. He stops to deal with the woman but reassures the distressed father that he will attend to his needs, too.

People's nonstop demands can eventually wear down even the most energized among us. Jesus seems to be operating out of a reserve born of experience and utter trust in almighty God. In each instance he makes a judgment as to the urgency of the situation. He then makes time and offers hope to those who are reaching out to him. But he also ranks their needs and responds accordingly. Although called on first

by Jairus, Jesus rightly judges the urgency of the woman's touch.

While we may not have within us the power to heal or to raise the dead, we can offer hope and time--and sound judgment as to the urgency of such requests. What those of us in ministry have to offer is not a vain hope that will bear no fruit but a hope based on God's promise never to leave or forsake us in our time of greatest need. The time we offer can be of immense encouragement to people in the midst of struggles and suffering. Just to take a moment to focus intently on their concerns can be heartening to them beyond measure as they wrestle with the setbacks and adversities that come to all of us from time to time.

Are there those who waste our time with the trivial and insignificant? Yes. We've all known such people. And in such cases, one of our greatest gifts to them could be teaching them how to make distinctions between the urgent and the important.

I recall fondly the wisdom demonstrated by the pastor of my youth, who gave shape and formation to my early years in ministry. This seasoned pastor knew how to bring balance to the demands the church and the community placed on him. One Sunday morning, after an especially hectic week of dealing with people's problems, he pleaded with the members of the congregation to quit waking him up through the night only to tell him that someone from the community had been arrested and put in jail. In a moment of exasperation he said, "That's who jail is for--people!" He went on: "Now when they put your horse in jail call me, because a horse has no business being in jail."

The congregation chuckled and most of them, I believe, got the message. This pastor was trying to get us to make a distinction between the urgent and the important. It was important for him to know when someone had been put in jail, but it was not urgent enough to wake him up in the wee hours of the morning. The incarcerated individual would be just fine until the pastor had time to get down to the jail to inquire about him the next morning.

Not everything important is urgent. Over time, wisdom and experience can help us draw those crucial distinctions in our ministry.