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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

God's Gracious Call

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett
January 25, 2009
Ordinary 3 (Year B)

Mark 1:14-20

Mark's Gospel begins with a bang—and it doesn't stop until the women run breathless—and speechless—from the tomb on Easter morning. It's a fast-paced romp from beginning to end, and you barely get a chance to stop and catch your breath. You get a sense of that right here in the first chapter, when Mark doesn't even take the time to tell anyone about Jesus' birth. There's no mention of Mary and Joseph; no stable in Bethlehem; no shepherds out in the fields. Only this shot from the starter's pistol: "The beginning of the good news (or gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

From that quick beginning, Mark moves on to the radical transformation that good news brings to the world, and he first puts the kingdom's message on the lips of John the Baptist, and I suspect that of you remember his one-sentence sermon well: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Our passage today, however, begins with what seems like a throwaway line—nothing more than a marker of time—only it's hugely significant. Mark gives us the sobering news: "Now after John was arrested..." As if hearing a whisper from the prompter telling him that John the Baptist has left the stage, Jesus steps on to begin his ministry. And his first sermon sounds eerily familiar: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

This is a huge moment, because Mark understood John the Baptist to be a pivotal figure. He has been called the hinge on which the ages shifted. "Before John, there was the time of the Law and the Prophets; after John, there is the messianic age of Jesus. John himself faces both directions; he is the last of the old prophets and the first of the gospel preachers."

So when Jesus hears that John has been arrested, he knows he has received a theological cue that his time has come. The moment has arrived for Jesus to stir into action.

And he begins by preaching the message of the kingdom. When John had announced that the kingdom of heaven had drawn near, it was like a person pointing to a rain cloud on the horizon and announcing that a refreshing rain would soon come. But when Jesus says the same thing, it means that the hoped-for kingdom was beginning to happen in and through him. In other words, in his words and actions, as his ministry begins, Jesus himself is the cloudburst of the kingdom.

And the reality of the kingdom means a reordering of life. We are told enough by Jesus to know that this is a kingdom which changes everything, that it is a call to repentance in the deepest—and best—sense of that word. Whenever we set out to follow Jesus, in other words, we are in for a complete reorientation of our whole lives.

Of course, not everyone buys that. I was in a conversation this past week with a

group of people trouble by someone's statement of faith in the upcoming presbytery meeting packet. Several folks were troubled that the person coming into the presbytery had written that following Jesus is unsettling. My reflection led me to suggest that if Jesus' call to love enemies, and welcome the stranger, and turn the other cheek wasn't unsettling, then nothing was.

There is no doubt about it: If you answer Jesus' call to follow, your life is going to change. And there's also a companion truth. It's not just going to change once, but over and over and over again as you follow the Living Lord wherever he leads.

The rest of our text today gives us a picture of what that looks like, as Jesus calls out to two sets of brothers to come and follow him. Taken together, these two stories of the calling of his first four disciples make it clear that Jesus calls people from the midst of family relationships, and from a workaday world, into a new set of relationships and to a new vocation.

In a sense, this means that Jesus' call to follow calls into question our family ties and creates some tension with our occupations. After all, the kingdom of heaven doesn't exist for the sake of the family, no matter how much we may wish it were so. The family exists to serve the kingdom of heaven.

And, no matter what else you may hear from countless preachers and authors, the goal of the kingdom of heaven is not to make us better and more productive in our jobs. No, our work is truly effective when it serves to express the will of God. In these call stories, Mark seems to want us to know that "the patterns of our lives are not made secure by the kingdom of heaven; the kingdom of heaven rearranges them into the new design of God's own making." (Long 43)

But, while it may be a reordering, it is not a wiping out. Jesus calls these brothers to new lives as disciples, but it doesn't wipe their identity away. They are still brothers and sons and fishermen. Their past, in other words, hasn't been obliterated; it has been transformed by Jesus' call to follow." (Long 43)

But here's the place where we have to continually remind ourselves of something this story makes abundantly clear. We don't simply get caught up in the net of the kingdom and then sit back for the remainder of our days. No, we who answer Jesus' call to follow are given a new identity; we are made to be fishers of people ourselves. We who have tasted the goodness of God made known in Jesus Christ are invited—even commanded—to invite others in as well. So the message that was first on John's lips and then sounded from Jesus is now our own.

And, what's particularly important, is how we translate Jesus' words about us and fishing for people. So often, you hear that phrase as another task for the church to do. You know, we should fish for people. We think of it as an action. But a better translation is that Jesus is really saying that "I will cause you to be fishers for people," which is really a question of identity. In that way, fishing for people isn't something we do; it is who we are.

And that's where our challenge begins. We are to have a passion for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others, and we don't always live out that passion. In fact,

if there's a word that stops a Presbyterian in their tracks, it's the e-word. No, I don't mean "election," either the political or theological kind. I'm talking about "evangelism"—the gospel call to bear witness to what we believe. If it's true—as I have seen reported many times—that speaking in public is the thing humans most fear, there's no doubt that our fear is ramped up significantly if what we are talking about is what we believe about God and Jesus Christ. Too often Presbyterians, indeed all Christians, have answered that old question of the church—can I get a witness?—with a silent no.

The Presbyterian seminary I attended in Louisville, Kentucky was just down the road from Southern Seminary, which is a Southern Baptist institution. Things have changed greatly at Southern Seminary in the couple of decades, but during my student days, there was a great relationship between the two schools. We shared resources and professors and had some great sports rivalries. We also shared a joke which played on our denominational stereotypes. The joke went that the Baptists and Presbyterians should unite to form a single denomination so that the Baptists could bring the people in and the Presbyterians could educate them.

I say we shared the joke, but frankly, it was a joke that didn't cut equally. And it's also a fact that much humor is really a way to say something truthful, only to wipe it off with those great words, "I was just kidding." Many a truth has been said in jest, and there was no denying that Presbyterians had trouble with evangelism.

Why do we struggle with evangelism? It could be that we are afraid that our faith needs to be perfectly worked out before we open our mouths to speak. In other words, we want to be sure that all of our theological i's are dotted and our t's crossed. Many of us are consumed by the hidden dread that we aren't prepared to speak about our trust in God—that, if pressed, we couldn't muster up a single intelligible sentence to express our faith. In other words, we forget that one of the main ways we come to a deeper understanding of what we believe is by daring to put it into words (Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 6). We do not simply speak to articulate our faith, but to discover it and deepen it. Unfortunately, too many of us want our faith perfected before we speak.

So there's one reason we have trouble with evangelism, but there's another one that troubles us deeply. We have seen what others have done in the name of "evangelism," and some of it has been downright offensive. Perhaps you understand what one person wrote when he likened evangelism to professional wrestling. He writes, "Both are considered to be activities that draw large, uncritical crowds, involve a measure of sham, work on irrational emotions, and could end up hurting somebody." (Thomas G. Long, "Preaching about Evangelism—Faith Finding Its Voice," in Thomas G. Long and Neely Dixon McCarter, ed., *Preaching in and Out of Season* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 77.)

Have you ever seen anybody hurt by evangelism? I remember a kid from my youth group growing up. He was a couple of years older than I was, so I was still part of the youth when he went away to college. He went to a college in West Texas and ended up with a roommate who was determined to save him. It didn't matter to his roommate that

he had been part of the church his whole life or that he was not interested in listening to his sermons every day.

It got to the point that Eric was torn between two extremes—he knew he either needed to convert to this person’s understanding of the church because he was afraid he’d end up in hell. Or, he could leave Christianity altogether. I remember my pastor had to write a strong letter to the roommate and another to the roommate’s pastor, sort of the equivalent of a lawyer’s cease-and-desist letter.

We all have examples of times when we’ve seen evangelistic tactics betray the good news they seek to convey, and we’ve decided we want no part of that.

Some of us are hesitant to speak because we fear we must have all the right words for our faith. Others of us are hesitant to speak because we don’t want to be associated with the evangelistic terrorists that we have encountered. But there is, I think, a deeper reason we don’t bear witness to the gospel as often as we would like. We know being a Christian means that we have chosen to follow a certain *way* of life—a way of life marked by self-giving love, concern for the poor, welcome of the stranger, forgiveness of those who have sinned against us, and a whole litany of demanding characteristics of what it means to be a disciple. And we wonder: does my life show evidence of what I believe? And, to draw closer to the call to evangelism, am I actually living the life that I am inviting others to live?

Most of us Presbyterians are troubled by evangelism. Some of us want our faith neatly worked out before we speak. Others of us are fearful that our witness might be offensive. And still others of us hesitate to talk the talk because we fear we’re not walking the walk.

Ultimately, however, all of that is a dodge. All God really wants from us is to let our lives—our very ordinary, part of the family, just another worker lives—show the marks of our discipleship. Evangelism, in other words, is anything you say or do that moves another person closer to God, and so many of those things aren’t earth-shattering. But, when used by God, they can be life-transforming.

So here’s what I want you to do this week. I want you to think about where God has placed you. Think about the web of relationships that is your family; think about where you labor—whether at home or an office or at school; and then determine to let God use your life—the things you say and the things you do—as an entryway for another’s reflection about God’s call to them. And, when you sense the Spirit’s nudging, as I suspect you will, don’t be afraid to do whatever it is you think you should. After all, we are followers of Christ, and while that means a lot of things, it always means that we are to have a passion for sharing the good news of what God is up to in Jesus Christ.