

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c

I Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

02/04/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

29As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38He answered, "Let us go on to the

neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” 39And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Proclaiming the Good News

Good morning! If you were preaching, how many verses of scripture would you want to work with? I mean, today’s gospel reading has 10 verses, is that enough? Could you preach with five? How long could you preach? 10 minutes? Or maybe the verses aren’t as important, you need a whole story or section to make your sermon complete.

Well, when I was in seminary I visited a Methodist church just outside of Columbia, SC. It was a largely African-American community that had been very intentional about the different ways they did ministry. I attended twice and each Sunday the pastor preached using one whole verse. What was more amazing was that he preached for roughly 30 minutes each time using only one verse! AND it was interesting the whole time! It wasn’t like listening to me preach for 30 minutes, we would all lose interest, including myself. Now, if you take a look at today’s reading, we’re dealing with 10 verses, that preacher could go on for five hours with this much material! Meanwhile, give me 5-8 verses and I’m struggling to make it through 10 minutes. We aren’t just dealing with one story today, either. The text picks up where we ended last week and we’re given four different pieces with a summary at the end. Now, don’t worry, I don’t bring this

up to warn you that you have a 30 minute sermon coming. I bring it up to highlight the richness that we can find in scripture.

Today's story has a little something in it for everyone! Let's take a look. The story, as I said, picks up directly following the events of last week's text, which I'm sure is still fresh in everyone's mind. In fact, I made it a big deal last week about how much had happened in the first chapter of Mark and yet we're still not to the end! We won't get there for another five verses. Last week's teaching and exorcism along with the readings today consist of one day's activities in the city of Capernaum.

The first and largest section of today's pericope — do you know what that word means? It's a fancy word that we use to name the specific section or unit of scripture that has been assigned or chosen for worship — the first and largest section of today's pericope is the story of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law. Some of us can identify with this text because of the mother-in-law's immediate attitude and response to faith. She wastes no time in jumping right into whatever task that needs done. She needs no special attention or acclamation, she embodies discipleship through her service.

Some complain that the text highlights the gender stereotypes of the day and while this is often the case in scripture, I agree with Dr. Lamar Williamson Jr, another man, which doesn't help my argument, but bear with me. He writes the following:

“In some ways the text is alien to understanding of women's liberation. This woman's place is in the home; she is in a sense heroic; her faith is not even mentioned... In another sense, however, this text like several others in Mark makes the role of woman the model of discipleship. Here the mother-in-law's response to the healing of Jesus is the discipleship of lowly service, a

model to which Jesus will repeatedly call his followers throughout this Gospel and which he supremely embodies in his own service."¹

It's not that quiet servitude is the place for woman, but rather that ALL Christians are called towards this type of life. In fact, while Mark is not a feminist writing, it continually uses women to highlight the type of life of faith that we are called to live. In contrast, the male disciples, starting with Simon in a few verses, increasingly misunderstand and fail to do even a passingly decent job of understanding Jesus.

The miracles outside of Simon's house give us our next vignette. In three verses we're told that the whole town surrounds the house. As the crowds gather, Jesus casts out demons and heals the sick. Performing miracles before the crowd's very eyes. Others of us feel drawn to this section of the text. Of all the things that we often hear prayed, petitions for healing are by far the loudest. And while we don't recognize possession in quite the same ways as they did 2,000 years ago, I doubt there is a person in this room who doesn't have at least one demon they fight in their private lives. As one commentator wrote: "*The point is that Jesus heals all sorts of maladies in all sorts of environments for all sorts of people.*"²

The third story hits home for others of us who desire the peace that comes from a more active prayer life. Jesus departs to a deserted place. The text here makes a larger reference to the wilderness, bringing to mind Jesus' time just a short bit ago in the desert. But Capernaum had very little "wilderness" around it and so we often see the text translated as it is for us, "a deserted place," or as some scholars like to say, "to a lonely place." Jesus departs three times in the

¹Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 54-55

²Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 53

Gospel of Mark to have intentional devotional time, and he is always interrupted. The story today teaches us that there are important rhythms to life: “*work, rest, and prayer.*”³ For some reason we live in a culture that seems to say that our worth is only defined by what we can produce, that a person’s most important characteristic is how long they can work. We make fun of and belittle those who aren’t required to work as hard as we do, as if it’s a bad thing. Elders do this all the time, “back in my day we had to...” as if they have forgotten that the whole point of working so hard was so that their loved ones could have the life they didn’t. Yes, work is important, but so is time with friends and family, and so is personal prayer!

Our final section has us witnessing Simon-Peter’s first of many mistakes. He comes searching for Jesus, asking him to come do some more magic. But, as I said earlier, the disciples in Mark completely miss the point. God has become flesh so that good news can be proclaimed to all the people. Preaching the good news is why God has come, and that is what they do.

So, a little something for everyone. When I was first planning this sermon in my head I thought that was where I would go. My point was going to be that each section of the pericope today can correspond to the different types of people and different ways we serve. Some of us need to be reminded that service is the mark of a Christian, others need healed. Some of us need reminded that a personal prayer life is just as important as our other faith work and some need to be reminded that Christ has come to preach the good news to all the nations. But then I realized that all of us needed to hear ALL of the lessons in today’s scripture.

The disciples serve as a dangerous reminder for those who are so active in the church; in the Gospel of Mark the people who spend the most time with Jesus are the ones who understand

³Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 56

him the least!⁴ We can so easily become complacent and comfortable in our roles in the church, forgetting that God is calling us towards all of human experience. Yes, we are all given certain gifts, and those gifts come in a variety of forms, but we are all called to certain basics of the faith. We need Jesus to heal us from our fevers, to cast out our demons, and our response is one of humble service, and the ultimate example was shown to us by his death upon the cross. We spend time in prayer, not just on Sundays, but in all of life's lonely and deserted places so that we can remember the grace that has been given to us. And we don't get comfortable; the sharing of the good news is never over, never finished. There are still plenty of people who have yet to hear and see the good news of Jesus Christ. Fortunately, we've been given a few directions on how to tell them. Amen.

⁴Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 58