

“How to Attract a Crowd Without Really Trying”
Mark 1:29-39
San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ
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If you scratch your head at some of my sermon titles, you're not alone. It's a shot in the dark to name a sermon a month ahead of time so it can be printed in the newsletter. In this case, after pondering the lectionary text for a short while, it just struck me how quickly people swarmed around Jesus. He didn't publicize in the paper, TV, or radio; yet it's like this mega church sprung forth from the ground upon which Jesus walked. So that's where the title came from.

In today's text Mark gets to the point quickly. Jesus and his companions went straight to the house of Simon and Andrew, they immediately tell Jesus that Simon's mother-in-law has a fever, Jesus takes her hand, the fever leaves, and she begins to serve them. This is another example of how Jesus heals one, who at that time, society deemed "less than." She was a woman. On this Sunday which for the United Church of Christ begins a week of celebration for the ministry of women, we are reminded that Jesus was ahead of his time, he was on "God's time" when it came to women's equality. Today's liturgy as well as the communion liturgy is from Common Lot, the UCC's Women Resource Publication.

To a first century Jew, Jesus' close friendships with women would be "in your face." They would have gotten his point. Word would have gotten around that this Jesus, this new rabbi, would be anyone's friend, and this would be a message of hope to many people left out or neglected in Jewish society. One reason Jesus didn't have to try to attract a great crowd was because this open invitation. He did not exclude anyone. Everyone was invited to the table of fellowship. You're likely to have a better turnout at any event if you don't start crossing undesirables off the list.

Another reason Jesus attracted a crowd was because he was preaching good news, and this good news of the gospel was the invitation to be part of God's great transforming work in the world. It was said about Martin Luther King, Jr., that he had the ability to make people believe they could be bigger and better, more giving, and more loving than they ever thought imaginable. I imagine that was some of the good news Jesus was able to convey through his preaching, his teaching, and his presence. In order to be part of changing the world, we sometimes have to change ourselves. When I read the words of Jesus as a child, I picked up on every critical word he ever said. I found that to be more debilitating than transforming.

When I read the words of Jesus today, I hear a message of hope, a message that calls forth from me the God-given gifts, the divine light that God breathes into all creation. I hear a message that in spite of all my failures and shortcomings, I belong to God; I have a home in God. Yesterday we celebrated the life of Terry Williams' grandfather, Nancy's father, Melissa's great-grandfather. We held in sacred memory the much-loved family member who touched their lives and the lives of others. And we recognized that although he lives in our hearts forever, as Melissa so eloquently said, he is now at home in God.

The Jesus who walked this earth was very much about healing people and calling forth the best of people in the here and now. And we must remember that "healing" and "cure" were not the same things in biblical times. Jesus was a real person who cared about real life issues. I say this because I know some people who worry so much and dwell so much on what comes after life that they never really live IN this life. The historical Jesus beckons us to be willing partners with God in this world, to be active participants, co-creators with a God who longs for so much more than currently is.

The Christ of our faith calls us to also remember that we belong to God. We have a home in God. One of my favorite teachers in seminary writes about that home this way:

There is a home in God, a home for the whole universe. In that home, multiplicity finally achieves unity, and fragmentation is embraced in wholeness...the unity is the ever-living God, drawing upon the divine resources of infinite possibility....It is ...unity, beauty, and holiness: the reign of God which is the reign in God, which is God. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, God-Christ-Church, p.216.

We have to trust God that if we are faithful and willing partners with God, God will not abandon us, or as the apostle Paul said, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God. Balancing the call of Jesus to follow him in the present with the hope of God for our future is sometimes a challenge for Christians.

I'm not sure if this is a logical sequence of thought but I kind of think it is. Anyway, I feel compelled to share this story. A week ago Saturday morning. we were just about to begin the women's retreat when Allison called and asked, "Do we believe Jesus died for our sins?" Well, the easy answer is "yes," "of course," but that doesn't really get at the full meaning of that phrase. And furthermore, to answer that question with a simple "yes," has become a touchstone of easy Christianity, cheap grace, to use the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer the Germany theologian who was hung at Auschwitz during the final weeks of W.W.II.

First and foremost, I believe Jesus died because he was faithful to God. Jesus was not like the animal sacrifices of Judaism which being placed on the altar would send smoke to heaven to appease God for human beings sinfulness and win salvation from the dangers of their world. Perhaps the New Testament writers used words that would resonate with their first readers who knew the meaning of this kind of sacrificial dying. I believe Jesus was faithful to his divine calling which meant he was faithful unto death. He didn't back down or back off of God's message even to save himself. He so knew God, and he was faithful to God's vision of what the world could be and should be. He was completely in tune with the God-Spirit so that the divine flowed through him uniquely, completely, and thus through him we receive salvation. We come to know that our sin, our humanity, all the ways we fail God and fail ourselves is NOT the final word. Jesus saves us because he models for us that there is indeed something worse than death and that is to turn our back on God's call for our lives. Because Jesus was faithful, death was not the final word. The cross has no power in the face of authentic faithfulness.

Perhaps some of you will have different ways of explaining how Jesus died for our sins. I simply offer these words to you as I did to Allison, because language and the words we use have power on how we understand the good news. I have to tell you that after our discussion about this Allison said, "Mom, why didn't you teach me this before!" Wasn't it Mark Twain who said something about the fact that between his 17 and 21 years, his parents suddenly became smart?

Jesus' message of good news was a call to authentic living--life lived with integrity in faithfulness to God. He lived for that message, died for it, and his spirit still calls us to it.

Today we are invited (like everyone else) to this table of open communion. No one is excluded from the bread of life and the cup of blessing. These gifts of God remind us that God sustains us with all we need. They remind us of the presence of Jesus so we will never forget what salvation means. They are gifts to us in the here and now and yet, they move us to trust in the future which we place in God's hands. And they empower us with the energy to go forth attracting a crowd with the good news that God loves us with a great love, a love that knows no beginning and no end. AMEN