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Epiphany 5B – February 4, 2024

“A Whole City at the Door”

Read: Mark 1: 29 - 39, Memorize: Mark 1: 38

If you have ever gone to a hospital for a very delicate surgery or procedure you may be able to identify with a cartoon I recently ran across. In this cartoon you see the doctor in his office speaking with his bookkeeper. The subject of their conversation is a patient's bill which apparently had been in accounts receivable for a very long time. The caption reads, “She said that since you told her her recovery was a miracle, she sent her check to the church.”

Mark tells us about numerous miraculous healings, which set the stage for Jesus' growing reputation. With Jesus' growing fame, the crowds are now seeking Him. In fact, Mark tells us, the healing ministry might actually be constraining the true work of Jesus.

Jesus reacts by going away to pray. The disciples come, seeking Him, to tell Him that the crowd is waiting and He can make a really big impact if He comes back into town. Here's where I believe Jesus is answering a question that the church has struggled with for centuries: What is the purpose of the church? Turning aside from healing, Jesus says, “Let us go somewhere else . . . so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

So, what's the direction Jesus offers? Is it doing good works or preaching the Good News of the Kingdom? Doing good works, which we might interpret as helping people. Many would say helping people with their problems and needs, is vital, because that will attract people so that we get to preach to them. Is that what Jesus would say?

In a sense, doing good things is easier. They'll like us and we help them to solve their problems, but have you ever noticed that you can help people time and time again, and the problems just keep coming back. I think the answer to that is a bigger problem, sin. Our brokenness leads us to repeat the mistakes that lead us to the same

problems, because our lives have not changed. We're just putting a bandage on them. Jesus wants us to experience true healing, the kind that changes our lives.

I suspect that there were all sorts of assumptions driving the people to come flocking to see Jesus. Mark tells us that following His temptation in the wilderness, Jesus came to Galilee, the region where today's passage finds Him healing and casting out demons, "so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

That helps us understand why, when the crowds were beating a path to His door and the disciples came to fetch Him back, He said no. Jesus tells them they are moving on to accomplish the real purpose, the proclamation of the Good News.

Jesus was not in the crowd business. His own disciples seemed eager for Him to be, but Jesus knew the focus of His ministry. It did include healing and doing good, but healing and doing good was not the end goal. It's a good clue for us to remember when people ask what is the purpose of the church. The purpose of the church is a Word and Sacrament ministry that proclaims the Good News of Jesus, that heals our real needs.

It has been said that most Americans "tend to worship their work, work at their play and play at their worship." Now all the essential elements of life are there, but their order, and especially their focus, is upside down.

Perhaps that's why the disciples came seeking out Jesus. They didn't understand that. The next morning when the crowd was still looking for Him, the disciples came in a rush of misplaced enthusiasm. I imagined they asked: "What are you doing out here praying? The whole town is looking for you, your ministry is a success, come on back and greet the multitudes."

Jesus declined that invitation. He had not come to become the popular healer, who could have His own show on Sunday mornings. He had come to proclaim a message. The message that was important for more people to hear.

So often we think the most important thing that we can point out about Jesus is that He is a miracle worker but in Jesus words, the most important thing He came to do is preach. He was there to proclaim the truth about God. Everything else He did was secondary to telling people about a gracious, loving Father who would stop at nothing to accomplish His purpose.

Jesus saw the danger that His healing ministry might so overshadow His proclamation that He would be reduced to little more than an itinerant miracle worker. He rejected that role, left Capernaum, went out to Galilee pursuing His ministry of proclamation and assisting His message with signs and wonders, but keeping the content of His message ever before Him.

It is very easy for the church to get involved in doing good. There are lots of needs and lots of opportunity, but that's not the mission of the church. The mission of the church is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in order to make disciples.

Very often people question what value the church offers. Some think that the whole purpose of the church is to please people. They have many ideas of what the church ought to do and not do to fill the pews, because isn't that the ultimate goal?

As I said there are all sorts of ideas: less of this, more of that, less dogma and doctrine and more entertainment, less preaching and teaching; more of whatever will attract more people. For some it's less pounding on the pulpit, for some it's more. But I think in all those things we miss the point.

The example of Jesus is in the simple story. He healed, cast out demons and right away anyone who had a bunion was at the door knocking. But was that what Jesus was about? Did Jesus come into the world, to borrow the language of John, so that He could start a popular healing and exorcism ministry?

The Gospel of John begins with these very profound words: "In the beginning was the Word" That Word was Jesus. Jesus' ministry was proclaiming the Word that God wants all people to be saved.

There are three questions we would benefit from asking ourselves in our faith journey from time to time, to help us keep our focus as we walk the road of discipleship.

The first question, Where are you looking for Jesus? It doesn't pay always to look for Jesus in the same place. You may have met Him in prayer, but that does not preclude the meeting of Jesus in the face of another. We may have needed a certain aspect of the ministry of Jesus, but that does not limit His ability in every other circumstance of our lives. Where are you looking for Jesus today?

Next, we might ask, What do you want Jesus to do? Peter wanted Jesus to go back and keep on doing what He had been doing. For most of us, doing the familiar is all

we want. We might like to go back to the mountaintop experiences of our lives, to find Jesus just the way we found Him before. However, Jesus has moved on with His message and to stay with Him we need to move beyond the limits of our own past and into the future where He is proclaiming who He is to all the world.

Finally, What does God want you to do? That's the key. With the whole city waiting at His door, why did Jesus forgo that promising healing ministry and move on insistently with His ministry of proclamation? What kind of savior do we want? Sadly, the savior we often want is the savior who does our own bidding that we desire.

We only need to look at our prayers and know that frequently we are asking Jesus to do something for us. The question is, what kind of savior would that be? Are we going to demand of Jesus what we want or are we going to follow Him, no matter where He leads us?

Especially when we want to support the mission, this is an important question. There are whole communities outside our doors who need Jesus' message. What do we have to tell them about Jesus and His love?

And what does Jesus expect of us? Are we to wait for people to come into our doors? Are we hoping that they'll figure out who and where we are? Or are we to go out and bring that Word of Jesus to our neighbors, our state, our nation, our world? What would Jesus want of us, who are called His disciples?

More importantly, how do we do it? First, by being in His Word, so we know what the message is. Second, by asking God to give us the words and opportunity to share them. Finally, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, to boldly take the steps to proclaim His Word to all.

Count me in: What will you do to proclaim the Good News of Jesus this week?