

Everyone; Everywhere: Mark 1:21-45

April 24, 2016, Norwalk Christian Church, Year C, Fifth Sunday of Easter, Good News Series

Last week at our Church Board meeting, your church leaders decided to clear the normal agenda and simply do some visioning and dreaming. I kicked things off, by telling them that after I asked a question, I was going to be quiet for the rest of the meeting and hear their dreams and ideas. And you know what, I actually did it!

Don't worry, I'm not going to do that now. You'd feel short changed if you came for a sermon, and I just asked a question and sat down! :-)

And so, we began with this question: If we were starting a church from scratch in today's Norwalk, Iowa, what should that church look like? What kind of church would our community need us to be?

And then I was quiet, and your leaders started talking. This is what I heard.

They said our church should be a hub for the community. A place where one could discover God. That it should be a church that was giving, loving and accepting of all. A church that was open and flexible, that went to where the people were, instead of always inviting the people inside a church.

It should be a church that was okay with the gray--that realized the world wasn't black and white, and you don't have to have everything figured out. It should be a church that was not judgmental, where everyone was welcomed and loved. Especially, it should be a church where teenagers who may feel unsafe in a church environment because of prior experiences, could find love and acceptance.

It should be a church that had opportunities outside of worship for small groups to come together and study scripture and share life together. That had multiple connection points in our life together, where people at different stages of their lives could find common ground. As the NCC coffee cups say, it should be a church that is "sharing the journey together."

It should also be a church that cared about the people in our community who didn't have a church home, and found creative ways to welcome them, to follow up with visitors as well as introduce ourselves to new people moving into Norwalk.

And, perhaps most importantly, they talked about the kind of leaders this church would need: a group of committed disciples, who did more than just administer the business of a church, but were constantly visioning and finding ways to expand the ministries and deepen the life of the church. These leaders shouldn't do all the work, but should encourage everyone in the church to discover and utilize their gifts for ministry, as they always find ways to move over and include new people in ministries. These leaders

should lead and model a willingness to try new things and experiment for the sake of the Gospel. To never let fear of failure--or fear of success--keep them from doing things that may be new or out of the box.

It was an energizing conversation, one we want to have soon with the whole church (but more on that later). As I listened, I was struck by how a lot of what was being said was really who we already were, or at least who we are when we are at our best.

And I'll be honest, I didn't plan on that discussion becoming fodder for this Sunday's sermon. But then, the next day, I sat in my office and read the texts we read together this morning--and there it was--the church we described, except in Mark, it's not a church, but a person named Jesus.

Here we find, for the first time ever, the public ministry of Jesus, as he goes about his community proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God, and calling people to a new community, a new way of life. The things he does are the very things we said we wanted our church to be about. And right away, people start responding to his message.

But the people who respond are not the normal people you'd expect to build a church with. They are desperate people, people being stepped on and over by the religious and political systems of their day. Jesus' message of love and welcome is the good news they've been waiting for.

First, it's a man with an unclean spirit. After Jesus heals this demon-possessed man, word spread throughout the whole community, and people began flocking to Jesus. People can't believe that Jesus' teaching was with authority--that is, that he not only talked about the kingdom of God, but he went out and made it happen.

After healing his own disciple Simon's mother-in-law, people began bringing their sick family members and friends to him. The whole city would gather around the door, waiting to hear him speak and see what he would do next.

After several days of this, Jesus takes a day off, a Sabbath to go to a quiet place and pray, but his disciples come and find him. "Everyone is searching for you," they say. And Jesus' response is, "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."

And then, from town to town throughout Galilee, Jesus shares the good news. And people respond. So many people, that when he heals a leper, he tells the leper not to tell anyone about it. Things are getting out of hand. There's too many people. But guess what--the Leper's life's been changed and he can't keep quiet. And more and more people hear the Good News, and come to Jesus.

Mark ends Chapter 1 with this phrase: “Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.” Literally, the phrase is that, “everyone from everywhere came to him.”

Everyone from everywhere, flocking to Jesus.

Now, scholars suggest that the writer of our Gospel, Mark, isn't just writing to publish a story, but that he is a leader in his own church, and writes this gospel as a message of transformation for his own Christian community.

Even though they were among the first Christians, they were still struggling with the same thing we struggle with today: How do you make Jesus alive in our world today?

It was in response to that question that Mark gave his church this story of a risky, messy Messiah, who goes against the religious teachings of his day, in order to deliver in flesh and blood a message of Good News. And Mark's belief is that if his church would model their community after this risky, messy Messiah, then, like in Jesus' day, everyone from everywhere would come looking for Jesus.

Here we are, almost two thousand years later, still struggling with the same question: How do we make Jesus alive in our world today? And Mark seems to suggest the answer is also still the same.

Now, I was quiet in our board meeting last week. But I'm going to say what I think now: the church everyone described--really what they were describing was Jesus. And what they were saying is, if we could be a church that lives like Jesus lived, teaches what Jesus taught, treats people like Jesus treated people, then everyone from everywhere would respond to the Good News alive in our church.

And I believe that with my whole heart. And yet, it's much harder than it sounds, isn't it? Because it's so easy to let so much get in the way. As we've said, Mark's favorite word in this Gospel is “immediately”. Jesus is always on the move, and his message is an immediate message. It's easy to lose that immediacy, isn't it? When you're living in a comfortable world, attending a comfortable church, it's easy to forget the immediacy of the Gospel, and instead focus on the maintenance of an institution.

But the church your leaders described, that was a church that understood the immediacy of the Gospel. That people's lives are being destroyed by the sicknesses of poverty, prejudice, and fundamentalism. That families are in need of a community that loves and supports them, and walks beside them--no matter what. That people are desperate for the Good News--that God, through Jesus--and through us--is creating a new world. And if we are a community modeled after the the healing, world-changing, wall-breaking, welcoming message of Jesus Christ, then everyone from everywhere will respond.

You know what, I do have a question for you. And I'm going to ask it, then I'm going to sit down and be quiet.

Do you believe this?