

NEW BEGINNINGS
Mark 1:29-39
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 8, 2015

Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus casting out a demon from a worshipper who wandered into the synagogue in the town of Capernaum. Hearing that Jesus was in town we can imagine that poor man dragging himself to the Sabbath service to be healed even though his demon was kicking and screaming all the way. You may remember that Jesus cast out the demon and immediately restored the man to wholeness.

This incident is an example of someone with a heavy burden going to the house of the Lord to find relief. Once upon a time this wasn't anything unusual. People would seek out sacred spaces for help primarily because there was really no other place to go. There wasn't a plethora of self-help books, qualified psychologists, small groups specializing in physical, emotional and spiritual wellness as well as countless other distractions, like multiplex cinemas, sports arenas, social clubs and all the other options open to us today.

That partially explains why these days many sanctuaries are only half full on any given Sunday morning. The majority of people stay away, leaving us, the minority, to wonder why. Some people smarter than me who have seriously pondered these things have come up with a few plausible reasons why this is happening. It isn't just because of the sexual abuse scandals in the church nor can we blame the media for portraying organized religion in general and Christianity in particular a bad light.

There's something else that's been happening right under our noses and it wasn't finally detected until it was almost too late. The society's cultural norms and priorities that affect attitudes and behaviors have been slowly evolving over the last two generations.

That partially explains why we don't see many young families in church on Sunday mornings. It's not that they're pagans, it is because the Church hasn't found the right way to reach out and speak to them.

Last week I attended a Presbytery committee meeting. One pastor showed up late, he just got back from a conference being held on a large southern university campus. Thinking the theme of this conference might interest their readers, the campus newspaper editor sent two student reporters to the conference which included a worship service. After worship was over these two student reporters approached my friend who preached the sermon and asked, "Tell us what just happened in there?"

"What do you mean?" my friend asked back.

“I mean, what were you doing for the last hour with the singing and people bowing their heads and listening to your speech? What was the purpose of it all?”

The sad thing is these two obviously bright young adults, attending a prestigious university, didn't have a clue about Christian worship. I'm not suggesting they never heard of Jesus but apparently they never belonged to a church or attended a worship service.

Whose fault is that? The immediate reaction is to assign blame. Blame their parents, blame MTV, blame them for never making the effort to drag themselves out of bed on Sunday morning. On the other hand why not blame our churches for letting these young people slip through our fingers?

Anyone can cite anecdotal evidence of churches behaving badly and driving people away. At the same time you can also point to a lot of people buying into the rising tide of materialism and pleasure seeking permeating our society. Strong cases can be made for both. But what good would it do? The result of doing that would just leave a bad taste in everybody's mouth leaving no room for reconciliation. And isn't it the church's job to be all about reconciliation between people and God?

So, if we are really concerned about people absenting themselves from the Beloved Community for whatever reason the real question is, what should we be doing about it?

Maybe we should look and see what Jesus did about it, and then follow his example.

Jesus often taught and healed in a synagogue setting, but then we can also read about Jesus leaving the synagogues where he was preaching to the choir, and going directly out into the field and in the streets looking for those not in the synagogues. Mark reports:

“In the morning while it was still very dark Jesus got up... (after spending the previous day from morning to night healing the sick and casting out demons) Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place to pray. And Simon and his companions hunted him down (They weren't just looking for him they hunted him, maybe because they were afraid he ran away.) When they found Jesus they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns so I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.’”

Jesus didn't wait for people to come to him, Jesus went out looking for them to make himself available, unlike many of the religious people back then and now, who only open their doors and wait for the onslaught that rarely if ever comes, unless that church is already “out there” bringing Christ to people.

The challenge facing the churches today is, how do we go out there and bring Christ to people, especially if the people out there get annoyed when church people come knocking at their doors?

There was a post on the Loch Raven Village Facebook page complaining about Jehovah Witnesses knocking on their doors. Most people today don't appreciate unsolicited attempts to evangelize them. Fifty years ago on Saturday mornings men from this church would canvass the Loch Raven Village. Their clarion call was "Each one reach one." Back then it worked but not today.

Nowadays most Presbyterians aren't inclined to knock on people's doors because we don't want to be intrusive.

Question: What do you get if you cross a Jehovah Witness with a Presbyterian?

Answer: someone who knocks on your door but says nothing.

My point is if we are going to take Jesus' great commission to go out and make disciples seriously, we have to find the better way to reach out to love and serve our neighbors but not with the attitude, "We know something you don't know." Chances are, they already know what we know they know about Jesus but that shouldn't keep us from following Jesus' example by going out to serve the needs of people who live around this church. The way I see it God planted this church in this location close to seventy years ago to be a beacon of light and hope, a community of people who take the time to come together and rediscover our purpose for being here and then after assessing the needs of this neighborhood come up with a plan to use our time, energy and resources to whatever it is God wants us to do to be the good neighbors Jesus talked about in his parable of the Good Samaritan.

Of course this purpose and plan I'm talking about will never be found unless we go looking for it together as a faith community. Otherwise it will remain hidden.

As Jeff Kenton pointed out last Sunday in his Minute for Mission, vibrant organizations, by that I mean successful businesses, hospitals and schools have discovered that only periodically reassessing their purpose and goals as well as the way they operate is an essential exercise, otherwise things stagnate. If their people just go through the motions there's no team spirit, morale falters, there's a loss of interest, there's a loss of purpose. The organization suffers and so do the people they are supposed to serve because they're not being served.

In the last ten years we have gone through two very different self-assessment processes and both times those members who were involved learned important lessons that brought about changes in the way we "do" church around here. The first time we were able to identify our purpose and define our mission to the surrounding community (Bringing Christ to People). The consensus that emerged in the small group conversations was our purpose and mission at Babcock Church is to minister to children and their families. Admittedly it took some time before we got our act together but through trial and error we now have in place several ministries to children and youth, not necessarily children of members of this church, but children who live in the surrounding community, including the A+, Before and After School Program, Campus Life for middle and senior high students and more recently the Sunday Morning Drop-in Ministry. We also have the Community Garden, the Movies on the Lawn Fall

and Spring Series, and several annual events that have been well attended by families in Loch Raven Village.

I don't think any of these ministries would be in place if we didn't go through a season of discernment.

Then several years ago we went through another self-assessment to help us improve or reform our intra structure and culture in this place so we can be more efficient, intentional and accountable to each other. We identified our shortfalls in the areas of communications and follow through but we're still working on it. We've made some progress but we still have a way to go, not unlike any other organization where cooperation or team work is an ongoing concern and there's always room for improvement.

Now, several years later another opportunity is being given to us through the Presbytery to go through another season of discernment and self-assessment, this time the focus will be re-identifying or redefining our purpose and mission. Why must we re-identify and redefine our purpose and mission once again?

Because of what I said earlier. In the last five to ten years the prevailing culture that determines everyone's, including our own, attitudes, priorities and behaviors has been rapidly changing. For example there's a new crop of young adults out there who have graduated from school and are holding down jobs. When they were younger they were active in their churches. Today they are not. Statistics show this to be true. And if you listen carefully to that still small voice speaking to you perhaps you can hear God saying, "Christian, church member, disciple of Christ, what are you doing about this to bring Christ to people who need me?"

I don't think we'll ever know the answer to Jesus' question unless we listen for it. And one way we can listen is by coming together for prayer conversations like they did in the Book of Acts so the collective wisdom of this congregation will once again emerge from these conversations in small groups led by Cathy Lawson, Chris Sartor and Emily Meoli, Jenn Pearson and Monica Addison-Walker and Elisabeth Stafford. Then inspired by the Holy Spirit we can think about where we've been and where God wants us to go and then redirect our resources as the Holy Spirit leads.

Two thousand years ago Jesus interrupted whatever Peter, James and John were doing and changed their lives forever when he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men and women."

Jesus didn't say how he would make them fishers of men and women, but over the next three years they slowly learned because they stayed together as a small community of believers, and listened to and learned from Jesus then did what he asked.

Let's hope and pray that happens again here to us and through us so we can have the satisfaction of knowing we did something important and lasting for our neighbors for Jesus Christ our Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit.