

The Whole Story
Mark 1:29-39
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 8, 2009

Every Sunday morning you can hear a passage read from gospels telling a story about Jesus. But each of these readings is only a snapshot of the whole story, so hearing only random passages leaves you with an incomplete impression of Jesus. That's why you really need to know the whole story from beginning to end.

For the next five Sundays the sermons will be based on a passage from Mark's Gospels, so I have a homework assignment for you: read all of Mark from beginning to end the way you'd read an adventure story. Become aware of the plotline, recurring themes and characters. Be attentive as the story unfolds. Let the Holy Spirit help you read it again for the first time. Above all, become aware of Jesus and why he came in the first place. You might be surprised to learn Jesus' vision of his life and ministry is much broader than you think.

What do I mean by that? Consider this: despite our preconceived notions, it was never Jesus' intention to become famous for being a great healer, teacher and founder of one of the world's great religions. And Jesus wasn't crucified just so you can reserve for yourself a place in heaven.

Yes, Jesus was a compassionate healer and profound teacher and yes, Christianity is one of the world's great religions, and yes again, Jesus certainly died for the sins of the world, but when you know the whole story you can begin to see his complete plan: first, proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom and second, bridge the gap between God and us, so we can then bridge the gap between each other.

He came to tear down walls and build up bridges so we can obey his great commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." But before that can happen, we need to get with the program.

Last Sunday's sermon was based on the story in Mark's gospel immediately preceding today's story. A man with an unclean spirit invaded a synagogue's worship service. Two things happened when Jesus expelled the unclean spirit. First the obvious, the man was liberated from his demons and restored to physical and spiritual health. Second, not so obvious, at least to us, the man was now ready to be restored to the community.

If we were there that morning we'd be amazed by Jesus supernatural authority over demons and disease, but would we overlook the equally compelling miracle: healing between that man and his community?

Of course there's a big difference between the two healings. Only Jesus' authority could expel that unclean spirit, but only the members of that synagogue could welcome him back into community. In the first case only Jesus could make it happen. In the second case, only the community could make it happen.

Now, here's where you can begin to see how each recorded incident in Jesus' ministry must be incorporated into the larger story in order to make sense. When you read the whole story you learn things about the times, for instance the culture of first

century religious Jewish life was based on conformity to the Law of Moses. Failure to keep the law meant censure; you were kicked out of the community until you satisfied the law through the proscribed cleansing rituals.

But breaking Moses' Law or "sinning" wasn't the only grounds for excommunication. If you were sick, physically or mentally you too could be a candidate for excommunication. Being born blind or lame or having a serious skin disease, even hemorrhaging could cause the religious authorities to judge your illness as God's punishment for either your sin or your parents' sin. So, depending on your illness you could be either temporarily or permanently ostracized from the community.

Now you can see why the crowds grew so large. Jesus healed the sick and kicked out demons. Sure their health and sanity were normalized, but equally important the broken relationship with their community was also normalized. And if you could go back in a time machine and asked someone healed by Jesus, "What was more important, your physical healing or your restoration to the community?" many of them would be hard pressed to answer.

No one wants to have your own people judge and then turn away from you. No one enjoys being totally alone, cut off from your own kind. But as you read the entire gospel and see the religious leaders deciding who's "out" and who's "in" and then see Jesus challenge their authority to decide who's "out" or "in," you begin to appreciate who Jesus came to save us from. Ourselves.

Sure, we need to be saved from our sin, but we also need to be saved from the mess we made of human society with its pecking order, the culture of worshipping power and wealth, and the way we marginalize and judge people. So salvation isn't limited to your afterlife; salvation is also about our present life being redeemed as well.

Read the opening verse of Mark's Gospel. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God." Right there Mark reveals the predominant recurring theme of Jesus' story. He brings good news! In the 14th verse of the first chapter Jesus begins his ministry, not preaching about himself, but the new world order preordained from the beginning: "The time has been fulfilled (the time is now!) the Kingdom of God is coming near (God's Kingdom is all around you) repent, (turn away from the old way) and believe the good news! (embrace the new way)"

Jesus came to shift us into his new way. Our old way of living and believing is reflected in the religion of the scribes and Pharisees. To fit in, you had to follow the conventional rules, you had to work hard to fit in or you were out, with all the other outcasts of society. That's a huge burden to carry.

It was in that suffocating atmosphere Jesus brought a breath of fresh air. "Come to me, all you who carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest. When you come to Jesus you find he's not a harsh task master who'll bury you in overwhelming expectations, instead you'll discover his way is liberating, you're free to drop the oppressive burdens of your world and become a citizen of Christ's Kingdom. Now you're free to become who you were born to be, a child of God, living in community with your friends and neighbors. What's more, now you're free to stop living only for yourself and willingly give up your life for others."

A ten year old boy with a rare blood type needed an emergency transfusion. Luckily, his 5 year old brother had it too. His parents talked to him in the waiting room,

“Johnny, your brother needs your blood or he’ll die. The doctors can take your blood and put it in his body. Will you do it?” The boy, looking scared, said, “Yes.”

The doctors laid Johnny on a table next to his brother, hooked them together with tubes and began the transfusion. When the procedure was over the doctor said to Johnny, “Because you gave your blood your brother will live.”

Johnny then said, “I’m glad, but when am I supposed to die?”

This is what the story of Jesus can do to us, make us willing and able to be like Jesus, offering up ourselves as a living sacrifice so the Kingdom of God can come near.

Mark reports the disciples came looking for Jesus and said, “Everybody’s looking for you.” They were looking for Jesus because they thought they finally found a miracle worker who’d cure their ills and make them happy. Of course, Jesus was more than that, but they didn’t know the whole story because the story was just beginning.

We have the advantage over them. If you choose, you can know the whole story and if you choose, you can live the whole story by welcoming Jesus into your life and welcoming whoever God puts in your path. Remember how Jesus responded to the disciple’s statement, “Everybody’s looking for you?” He said, “Let’s go out to the neighboring towns so I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do.” And he went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” (Mark 1:38-39)

You know, that’s our job too, and we, like Jesus, can be agents of healing to the people around us because as you read in the fifth chapter of Mark, Jesus gave us his authority to spread the good news, heal the sick, welcome the stranger, kick out demons. How’s that possible? “The Kingdom of God has come near! The Kingdom of God is within you.”

Are you looking for Jesus too, maybe without even realizing he’s the one you’re looking for? Let him find you, let him love you, let him use you to bring others into his beloved community and into the Kingdom of God.