

Introduction

Some years ago while I worked in a large corporation, I was responsible for the technical operations in our remote offices around the country. We had been holding a weekly meeting/conference call to discuss current issues and upcoming events for over three years. One week I decided to pull out an agenda for a meeting three years prior, and I sent it out as the weekly agenda for the upcoming conference call. And the remarkable thing was: no one noticed. It seemed we were dealing with some of the same problems currently that we were three years ago.

Looking through some old Chapel bulletins that were stuffed in a book, I found the bulletin from July 2018 along with the sermon. And guess what: we are dealing with some of the same issues that we were six years ago. Are we just spinning our wheels?

The title of this sermon is “Where is Jesus to be found? ‘Reclaiming Jesus’” Where IS Jesus to be found? Where do we encounter the Holy? Is it at church? Is it only at church? If we don’t know where Jesus is, how can we reclaim Him? If we find Jesus, what do we expect from him?

Reading from Mark

Let’s dive into the story from Mark to see if there are any hints as to where Jesus can most reliably be found. The story opens in his hometown, and his disciples follow him. It’s an interesting detail. Jesus is from Nazareth and his disciples are from Galilee. They have walked with him back home. It is an interesting and significant detail; Jesus is returning home, but he’s different in several ways now, not the least of which is that he has followers.

The ones in the synagogue who hear Jesus preaching are astounded. They are into it at first. They are in awe. Then the analysis comes on: “Don’t we know this guy; didn’t he install our cabinets?” “That’s right! I know his brothers and sisters, I just saw them at the falafel stand on Wednesday.” “What makes him so special anyway?” Something like that.

After all this wondering and recognition, the next sentence is: “And they took offense at him.” Why do you suppose that was? They were astounded, but when they saw that he was “one of them,” all of a sudden, he is offensive. Jesus then demonstrates a masterful use of the double negative, “Prophets are not without dishonor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And the narrator tells us that Jesus couldn’t do any deeds of power except a few healings. Now it’s Jesus’ turn to be amazed.... amazed at their unbelief. It seems that there is some connection between trusting Jesus and Jesus being able to work. This matter of Jesus not being able to work is not the same as praying harder, by the way, but there is a connection between Jesus working and the offense the people feel at his presence and teaching.

Sermon-20240901-Reclaiming-Jesus, Mark 6:1-13

Jesus and his followers then leave Nazareth. They leave Jesus' hometown and enter the villages that presumably surrounded the big city. And then something interesting happens. You would think that given the cold reception Jesus received in his hometown that Jesus would then give them what they want – a physical show of power: he would perform showy miracles. People wanted a show of power and special gifts. Instead, Jesus quietly heals and then pairs off his followers and sends them out with special instructions. They are to travel light. They do: they preach repentance, they heal, and they call out evil when encountered.

Jesus doesn't give them the show they want, he doesn't do a deed of power to embarrass the old home locals; he instead authorizes others to go out in his name to heal, testify to God's love, to call out evil. This is very instructive about how our God operates generally. Never bragging, never a moment of old-fashioned power like lightning from above— instead, it's a new, quiet power, a power that points away from itself and pours into others.

Rancor and Hatred in Our Country

I'm one of those many people who have been very troubled by the rancor and, frankly, hatred I am seeing within our country. Often this is tied to religion, which baffles me.

A Biblical commentary I read in 2018 talked about this tension between religion and state, secular government – and that hasn't changed much. It's worth reading some of that commentary:

“No issues demand so much careful thought in the church as those that cluster around the place of faith in the public arena. In what way can God's purposes be fulfilled in and through the actions of the state? How and to what end is power to be exercised? What is the role of church members in the political process?”

“The discussions of such issues in the Bible do not always provide clear-cut solutions to our modern problems, because the historical circumstances then and now are dramatically different.”

So I'm tired honestly of hearing religion brought into the conversations about “I'm against this and I'm against that...” We all need to ask: “What are you FOR then?” The upshot of this movement was: we need to reclaim Jesus and his teachings.

The Reclaiming Jesus Movement

In May of 2018 a group of influential, non-political clergy from different Christian denominations gathered and constructed a manifesto called “Reclaiming Jesus.” They attempted as best they could, to bring the Jesus and the Gospel into 21st America. Here are some keys passages from that declaration:

Sermon-20240901-Reclaiming-Jesus, Mark 6:1-13

“We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake. It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity....

“WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED for the soul of our nation, but also for our churches and the integrity of our faith. The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; [and] deeper into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.”

There were six points in that declaration

WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). That image and likeness confers a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all of us as children of the one God who is the Creator of all things.

WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class (Galatians 3:28).

WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46) “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. “You shall not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16)

WE BELIEVE that Christ’s way of leadership is servanthood. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles (the world) lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:25-26).

WE BELIEVE Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples (Matthew 28:18).

To this past point...That’s where we will most reliably find Jesus, outside of the hometown. Remember our questions: Where is Jesus to be found? Where do we encounter the Holy? Is it at church? Is it only at church? How do we reclaim Jesus?

In Conclusion . . .

Whether or not I (or we) agree with the Reclaiming Jesus movement, I applaud the serious attempt to talk and act in support of values, ethics, morals, and religious beliefs. They are guided to be FOR something....not against....

Sermon-20240901-Reclaiming-Jesus, Mark 6:1-13

Of course, we have met in this space – this chapel -- each week during the summer. We come for comfort and strength. We certainly believe that Jesus is present with us, especially in the Holy Eucharist which we will take part in today; but Jesus is also found outside, in the villages, in the world as the story in Mark so clearly illustrates!

We disciples are always playing catch-up to the Risen Lord! Ever since that day when the women found an empty tomb, ever since then, we have been going to where Jesus has gone ahead of us, into Galilee, into the villages, into our neighborhoods. And once we go there, seeking him in the face our neighbors, he will be revealed, and we just might be empowered to do his work: healing wounds, preaching God's love, and calling out evil.

Let us go from here, into the villages following Jesus where he has already gone—and not simply following him, but being empowered by him to do his work of love and healing which the world and America so desperately need. AMEN!