

“Messengers of the Good News”
Mark 1:1, 35-39
September 18, 2011

Rev. Dr Don Dempsey
Presbyterian Church of Palatine
Palatine, IL

Last week I preached on our understanding of church as *ecclesia*, the Greek word for church, literally translated, “the called out ones.”

The purpose of the church is to be people “called out” by Christ to be his body, every day, in the world. The church is US.

Last week I described and defined both the “Vendor” church and the “Missional” church

The “vendor-driven” or the “market-driven” church has become pervasive in America today, across the whole theological and denominational landscape.

- If we come together only to get our own needs met, we reduce ourselves to consumers;
- If we come as an audience or as clients who take in what the professionals have to say, we reduce ourselves to amateur Christians.

The alternative, for lack of a better word, has been called the “missional church.”

It’s a bit of a red-herring, because when most of us hear the word mission we think of outreach to the poor or perhaps old-fashioned evangelism to the un-churched.

This *isn’t* what we mean by “missional. What is “missional” then?

I like the way Methodist Bishop Kenneth Carder put it in an address at Duke University Divinity School:

“The church is not the *object* of God’s mission; it is an *instrument* of God’s mission. Therefore, the role of laity is not primarily that of serving the institutional needs of the [church], but to *be* the church in the world where they work and live. A

church ... shaped by God's mission invites [us] to be part of what God is doing and where God is doing it."¹

At this transitional time, this "in-between time" in this church's life, we have the opportunity – I dare say the responsibility -- to assess who we are and why we are here, as church, as the ***ecclesia***.

In what ways have you given in to being a market-driven or "vendor" church?

In what ways have we been faithful to our calling as a "missional" church, people who seek in our daily lives to "participate in Christ's mission?" And how can we tell the difference?

Let me suggested that we examine our identity and purpose through the lens of the historic "Great Ends" of the PCUSA.

According to the Book of Order (F-1.0304), THE GREAT ENDS OF THE CHURCH are:

- The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Human Kind;
- The Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God;
- The Maintenance of Divine Worship;
- The Preservation of the Truth;
- The Promotion of Social Righteousness;
- The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World.

I have taken the liberty of narrowing down and consolidating these six Great Ends found in our Book of Order to "three great ends" of the church; we are called to:

1. Be messengers of the Good News;
2. Create a Community for the shelter and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, and
3. Become Justice-Makers.

¹ "Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry," Hickman Lecture, October 16, 2001)

Today, as we explore the first of these three “great ends,” to be messengers of the Good News; listen again to the good news according to Mark, in this morning’s gospel lesson, Jesus said:

“Let us go to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.”²

Every picture tells a story. How much more so does the 3-D filmstrip of our life. Every single person in the world has a narrative of their days and years on earth: we were born to loving or mean-spirited or indifferent parents, in a modest or wealthy or impoverished home. We hung out with the geeks or the popular kids or maybe nobody at all. We got caught up in the times: in world wars, cold wars, the Viet Nam war, or culture wars. We got married or didn’t; we had children or didn’t; we worked in and/or outside the home; we succeeded or we failed or a little bit of both. Our stories go on, until the day we die, and even then they continue in the memories of those we love, and in the consequences of all of our countless choices.

Every person has a story. I see it with breathtaking clarity every single time I am called on to preside at someone’s funeral. When I meet with the loved ones of the one who died, I hear the stories of success and failure, of blunders and triumphs, of special and funny moments; moments that transformed their lives and the lives of others on the account of their sheer kindness, courage or wisdom.

Perhaps we haven’t thought of it this way, but the Lord has a story too. The Lord’s story, like ours, can be remembered in its moments.

- The way God created the heavens and the earth, and called them good.
- The time God regretted creating humankind, and sent the flood to wipe us out, but saved a few to give the world a second chance.
- The promise God made with one single couple, Abraham and Sarah, to give them a land and a name and a multitude of descendents, even though they were too old to have children.

² Mark 1: 38

- The time that went by when God seemed to disappear, but then, when things could not get more bleak, God heard the cries of his people, and rescued us from the hands of the Egyptians, and brought us safely across the Red Sea, and gave us manna to feed us in the desert, and commandments to guide us into the promised land.
- The anger God unleashed at us years later, when we willfully ignored the Lord and neglected the poor and felt proud of ourselves anyway ... and God sent us into exile, and we were humbled, and then God brought us safely home.
- And then, oh, then! How God himself came down to us as Jesus, and was born in a barn of all places, and grew up to be a man who taught the truth ... who touched the outcast and welcomed the sinners ... who angered the self-righteous religious leaders and frightened political authorities
- How this Jesus took on the sins of the world to himself, and died on the cross for our sake, and rose from the dead so that death would have power no more.

This is the Lord's story. It is a story not simply of moments, but of an accumulation of choices ... the sum of millennia of actions that reveal the kind of Lord our Savior is. And it is our privilege, our wild and sacred privilege, to tell the Lord's story, and to witness to the impact that the Lord's presence has upon our world. And *this* is what being messengers of the good news means.

So how do we tell the Lord's story, and how do we carry that good news into the world?

Let me start with what we don't do: we don't hit people upside the head with it. I cringe at the self-righteous arrogance passing for evangelism over the airwaves and in political discourse today. For example, I get very upset when an individual alleges to speak *for* God on any variety of topics.

Recently a former intern here at PCOP reported on his Facebook page that he was approached by two fervent individuals and asked if

he was saved? He answered “yes. I am active member in my church. They asked what church and he said the Presbyterian Church. They responded, “Brother, you are NOT “saved!”

That makes me angry, but what makes me really mad is the way such in-your-face God-talk has made many of us gun-shy about saying anything about our faith at all. If we allow fundamentalism to hijack the message of faith ... then theirs is the only voice of Christianity that’s ever heard. I find that incredibly frightening ... and I also find that sad.

So how do we strike the right balance?

First, one of the most effective ways we proclaim our faith doesn’t involve words at all: it is simply how we act ... every time we remember we belong to him, that we are marked as Christ’s own, and then act with integrity, or hold our gossiping tongue, or question a racist comment, or track our investments for their social consequences, or show up yet one more time to visit the bed-ridden friend or family member. Whenever we love because Christ loved us; whenever we think with the self-emptying mind of Christ; whenever we challenge abuses of power the way Jesus did ... we are carrying his story into the world.

Bishop Carder, again, considers this our primary calling as “missional” people:

“The church ... seeks above all else to LIVE the Jesus story. ... The church with a future is a church that knows who Jesus is, takes with utter seriousness what Jesus says, goes where Jesus goes, does what Jesus does, and loves those whom Jesus loves.”³

Our actions speak louder than our words, so it’s crucial we start there. But we can’t end there. Listen again to what Jesus tells his disciples about his mission:

³ Op cit., “Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry,” Hickman Lecture, October 16, 2001)

“Let us go to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.”⁴

Sooner or later, we must follow Jesus out into the world, proclaiming his message. But how?

Why don't we start by reclaiming our history? This congregation's founders – WASPs in general, and Presbyterians in particular, were modest about their faith, to be sure, but they were also informed. They knew their Scripture. They worship together faithfully. And they used God language effortlessly because it was fully integrated into everyday life.

We might start by getting to know God's story more fully. We all know that God is love ... but that can become a meaningless cliché, and it often doesn't do justice to the depth of God's own story.

God is love, but WHEN IS God also angry, or heartbroken, or delighted? What does it mean that God lives in us still?

We might start by remembering how we learned about the Lord ourselves. It doesn't just come written upon our DNA ... someone – more likely, many someone's – passed this story on to us. Our parents; a Sunday school teacher; a camp counselor; a professor; a friend. Think back on how you learned God's story.

We might start by pressing our comfort zone. The place to begin is probably not in your office but inside our community of faith. Volunteer at the PAD's shelter; talk to Michelle about becoming involved in the Christian Education program; volunteer to open or close a meeting with prayer; visit and pray with a sick friend; participate in the adult class that just started where we are talking about risking hospitality.

We might start within our own circle of loved ones. Read a Bible story with your young child or grandchild and talk about it. Reintroduce the language of faith to your supper table or at bedtime: Ask something as simple as “Where have you seen God today?”

⁴ Mark 1: 38

Recognize God's presence in your very midst and then "Celebrate God."

The language of faith, like any language, is always one generation away from dying out, and it is up to us to keep our language alive.

Some of us will be eloquent, and some of us will stumble, and none of us will have the words exactly right, not even half the time. We are called to speak, we are called to testify.

As seminary preaching professor, Tom Long puts it:

"We need ... to think of ourselves more than just 'church people.' We need to think of ourselves as more than people who go about our daily business and who have a quiet, almost secret compartment in our lives where we are religious. We cannot be human, much less faithful to God, if we keep silent. We must begin to think of ourselves – dare we claim the name? – as *witnesses*." ⁵

Beloved in Christ, we have a story to tell:

- It is a story of good news ... a story of love handed down from generation to generation.
- It is a story of the faithful worshipping a living God, remembering how he took us by the hand and led us out of bondage into freedom.
- It is the story of bread broken and wine poured, at the cost of the one who gave his life for us.
- It is the story of the extraordinary in our everyday lives, and how God appears over, and over, and over again.

Choose that story, live that story, tell that story. **Amen.**

⁵ *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 124).