

“Justice-Makers”
Mark 1: 1; 40 – 45
September 25, 2011

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Why are we here? What does it mean to be the church, the ***ecclesia*** – the “called out ones?” How do we practice hospitality as God’s people? These are important questions any time, but they’re especially pertinent at certain junctures in a congregation’s life – such as in the interim time before calling a new pastor.

Today as we are in the third week of a four-week series exploring our direction.

We started two weeks ago as we talked about the church as ***ecclesia*** – the “called out ones” and I suggested that American churches have often gotten caught up in market-driven forces better suited to corporations.

Many churches have become driven more to please the customer than to wonder what Christ wants; they judge their success more by numbers than by the fruits of the spirit; and treat their members more like consumers rather than the noble ambassadors of Christ that we are all baptized to be.

In recent years, Christian leaders all across the theological spectrum have been calling the church to question those priorities – and to focus instead on being “missional” churches. We talked about what it means to a missional church?

Essentially it means that we’re dedicated to glorifying God and following Christ in every aspect of our daily lives; that is, everything we do through this church as well as everything we do individually and then together we are called to support and love each other in that effort.

This Church’s vision – To Celebrate God, To Grow in Christ, and To Extend the Spirit has the potential to shape the course of this congregation’s life for some time to come.

To put legs under that vision, I pointed us back to the historic Great Ends of the Church, our 100-year-old “missional” objectives:

- 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 took the liberty to narrow down and consolidated these six Great Ends to “three great ends” of the church:

First, we are called to be messengers of the good news, last week’s sermon.

Second, we are called to be justice-makers, today’s sermon, and

Thirdly, we are called to be community-builders, to offer shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship for the children of God.

You can find these sermons on our website and hard copies are available at the Welcome Center.

In today’s Gospel lesson from Mark we heard about the leper who came to Jesus and begged him to make him clean. Jesus, moved by pity – or, as other manuscripts state, moved by anger – either case, whether it was pity or anger, Jesus chose to reach out, to touch him, and to make him clean.

Maybe both manuscripts are correct for it is easy to imagine Jesus moved by pity for lepers were the untouchables, they were complete outcasts; they were shunned as moral failures and they were thought to deserve their fate.

It is also easy to imagine Jesus moved by anger – not at the leper but at the religious authorities who cast this poor man out into the streets, literally as an untouchable, a person with no hope for restitution.

And Jesus chooses to touch this man, this untouchable, even when he knew that touching a leper resulted in one's own religious uncleanness.

Jesus is moved with pity, or with anger, or perhaps with both, to touch and therefore to save this man!

We're not surprised at Jesus' response, nor should we be ... but then, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, they should not have been shocked either, but of course they were.

As we read in the Hebrew Scriptures, we know about God's compassion for his people, particularly those who are most in need, and we know of God's anger at our indifference and our judgment.

In the Torah we read,

“If your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself ... you shall maintain him. ... You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for your own profit.”¹

In I Samuel we read:

“The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them ... inherit a place of honor.”²

In Isaiah we read:

“When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.”³

And in our Old Testament passage from Isaiah that Carol just read:

“God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”⁴

¹ Leviticus 25:35

² I Samuel 1:8

³ Isaiah 41:17

⁴ Isaiah 40:29

You get the idea. God is constantly looking out and reaching out to those in need. And God wants us to do the same.

Jesus certainly got God's message. In his first public words, recorded by the gospel of Luke, he opens his ministry by saying:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”⁵

And in one of his first public acts in our gospel lesson today, he finds himself reaching out to heal -- to touch an “un-touchable,” to heal one of the poorest outcasts of them all.

And it's in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus says to those who fed the hungry and clothed the naked,

“Well done, good and faithful servants; whenever you did so to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did so to me.”⁶

Jesus preached compassion for the poor, and so did his earliest followers. We read in the book of James:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not doing anything with it? ... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”⁷

I could go on and on, because Scripture is filled with passages like this. Someone has counted over 2,100 times that poverty is mentioned in the Bible. But I know I don't need to convince you, because I know you “get it” too.

As we aspire to greater compassion, what are we already doing?

⁵ Luke 4:18

⁶ Matthew 25:40

⁷ James 2:14-16

One of the ways we can inspire people to works of compassion is by being messengers of justice and compassion. This congregation has a history of doing this. For example:

How many of you read the article in last week's Sunday edition of the Daily Herald? It was an article about how all summer long you have tended and cultivated the church's garden. This year alone you will give more than 500 pounds of fresh produce to the local food pantry.

Beginning on October 5, every Wednesday night, through the end of April, we serve as a PADS Homeless Shelter.

Members of our congregation saw the need for both feeding and housing the homeless in our community and took action to see that these two ministries were created and maintained.

Every year this church gives a portion of its budget to a variety of mission causes in our community, the country, and throughout the world.

You have always given to mission through your pledge to Chicago Presbytery and through the Presbyterian Church USA Special Offerings, such as, the Peacemaking Offering which we collect beginning next Sunday.

These are just a few of the things that we are officially doing as a congregation.

Even though this church as an institution will never get "credit" for it, nor do I think we should, if we added up all our giving to other charitable causes, that we as individuals contribute, I think we would be amazed.

Some of you serve as volunteers and on boards of charitable organizations around the community. And I know that many of you give not only your money, but also your time to many worthy causes that benefit: the poor, the homeless, educational institutions, hospitals, and to other causes, like the Crop Walk, like Habitat for Humanity, and like Chicago's Night Ministry, to name a few.

Many of you helped this past summer with daily vacation bible school. Vacation bible school serves not only our own children, but many more children here in the Palatine area.

And if you have been in the basement lately you realize that the church's annual rummage sale is this coming Friday and Saturday with the proceeds going to other mission causes.

In all these examples and others, I know that God is thrilled, because in all these things, we are showing our compassion in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Does this mean we can pat ourselves on the back and go home? Of course not, and I can't imagine anybody here would want to do that.

And as we aspire to greater compassion: What more we can do?

I don't believe that any one is ready to rest as long as there are still hungry children in our country, or the elderly who are forced to choose between food or medication, people unemployed or under-employed, and the vast inequalities between rich and poor, which we see every day if we only have eyes.

As Christians, we can't close our eyes to the poverty that we see all around us – our faith won't let us – and so the only way we can enjoy the abundant blessings that we have is to keep reaching out in compassion in better and more creative ways as long as we have breath ... or better said, as long as Christ's Spirit breathes in and through us.

So what more can we do? I don't have the answers – but I do know that this is the question that we need to ask ourselves. I'm not an architect of grand plans, but I am intrigued by what may be possible as expressions of faith in the day-to-day work of our lives.

Finally – I am convinced that God has abundantly provided for us all.

He has provided more than enough food for every child to be fed, and then some.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof,” is how the Scripture puts it.

And God has provided more than enough love for every human being to be cared for, and then some.

And God has provided more than enough faith for us to take what we have and offer it up to him, and still have more than enough left over.

“If you choose,” the leper said to Jesus,

“You can make me clean.”

If we choose, God is saying to us,

“Then you can make my beloved children whole.”

We know how Jesus answered.

How, then, shall we?

Amen!