

The Gospel of Mark and Congregational Transformation

GO! BE THE CHURCH

"Mission Evangelization as a Strategy for Congregational Transformation"

Week Three: A Commitment to Christ

Text Mark 4-6

Day One

Read Mark 4

Once a person receives the Gospel and responds as a believer, that person becomes a Christian. Not a mature Christian, but a Christian nonetheless. Most often, if he or she is able to choose Christianity as their own on their own, they will choose to be baptized. In the United Methodist Church a person is often baptized as an infant. The congregation welcomes them into the family of God, they receive "all the benefits of Christ's passion." as one for whom Christ died, and his or her parents and church commit to raising the child as a Christian until such time as he or she confirms that they are choosing Christ on their own. From this moment on, they are Christian disciples, receiving God's call to live out their vocation in the world.

That vocation is best described in the "Great Commission" found in Matthew 28:18-20:

"And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(NRSV)

- **Apostolic Authority**

"And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Jesus declares his authority over the entire universe. There is no other higher authority! But what is often missed is that, as he declares his authority, he freely shares it with his disciples, which, as the cosmic and coming Lord, he continues to do across the ages. Remember! Jesus is in kairos time. Today's disciples are just as commissioned by Jesus Christ as the first ones – the 12 Apostles. You're just as called as Peter is.

Read Mark 4:35-41. After the storm is calmed by the word of Jesus, verse 41 says that the disciples were awestruck and asked one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Jesus authority "in Heaven and on earth" is much evident in the miraculous stilling of the storm. It is well within Jesus' power as the Lord of Creation.

With many of the disciples being fishermen, there may well be an issue of trust – does Jesus really understand the power of the storm and does he respect "mother nature" the way they have come to respect her. When they finally give voice to their fear and/or mistrust, it comes out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" In other words, "Jesus, wake up and look around. We're dying here. Will you PLEASE stop your napping and give us a hand?" It is very possible that what they were wanting was help pulling in the sails or bailing the water. They had not seen the authority Jesus would soon demonstrate – at least not as far as the weather is concerned. They get a reply they had not expected, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Here is the fundamental issue of Christian discipleship, namely trusting Jesus no matter

what the “weather.” The lesson to be learned here is that Jesus does, indeed, have authority over all in Heaven and on earth. He is bigger than anything we may be facing and it should be enough for the disciple that Jesus is with us, whether life’s seas are calm or not.

There are forms of Christianity that stress economic prosperity, happy families, and physical health as the inevitable and automatic consequences or evidence of discipleship. Such a false gospel turns a blind eye to the many Christian martyrs that populate the centuries, and the poverty in which most Third World Christians live. It is enough, is it not, that God is with us? One of the many names of our Lord is Emmanuel – Jesus, in other words, is God with us! We do not judge God’s care for us or the state of our soul’s health by the tranquility or absence of it in our lives. We “rejoice in the Lord” not because of our current circumstances but because Jesus is with us, as he said, “to the end of the age.” (Matt.28:20b)

What does it mean to you to know Jesus, himself, has commissioned YOU for ministry and given you HIS authority to do it?

Day Two

- **Go make Disciples**

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...

Jesus gave authority to his disciples to make more disciples. He gives us compassion for the salvation of others and the yearning, determination, and motivation to go from proclaiming the Gospel to releasing an evangelical mission into the world. Churches exist to grow as they reach out to new persons so that they, too, may know Christ. Christians are motivated by their “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6). The Sri Lankan evangelist, D.T. Niles, said it most eloquently: “Evangelism is one beggar telling another where to find bread.”

Read Mark 4:1-9. The Parable of the Sower begins with the injunction to “Listen!” Listen, first, to the main point. Although there is seed and soil in the parable, the emphasis is on the sower. The sower’s job, in Jesus day, is to sow seed (or broadcast seed – scatter seed with your hand onto the ground and allow it to grow wherever it lands) without regard to the condition of the soil. If we assume the soils represents a variety of people in a variety of circumstances, how many times have we bypassed certain people because there has never been any interest in Christ shown previously? How many times have we been afraid to give God credit aloud for something God obviously had a hand in because the people around us have never shown any interest in God or had been hostile in the past toward matters of faith? Seed and soil are God’s responsibilities; the sower broadcasts the seed; the disciple of Jesus shares his faith whenever the opportunity arises and to whomever God puts in his path.

Two other parables follow immediately and are related to the Parable of the Sower – the Parable of Spontaneous Growth and of the Parable of the Mustard Seed. There are two seasons of human activity in producing a crop: planting and harvesting. God's good news is to be shared and followed up on, but the growth in between is a mystery of God's Holy Spirit. Growth happens! From the seed comes the plant, which in its time will develop its fruit. It is the disciple's task to watch for the fruit and to follow up on it. Faith sharing may be followed, in other words, with an invitation to a church service, or if the fruit is ripe and ready, an invitation to receive Christ as Lord and Savior! (Note: Consider getting a copy of *The Faith-Sharing New Testament with Psalms*, published by Cokesbury, particularly for the appendices on "The Essentials for Leading a Person to Christ.")

Now read Mark 4:30-32, the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Let the Church take heart *and* be challenged! Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – the smallest of seeds sown. Yet, when it takes root and grows, it becomes the largest of all garden plants and the birds of the air make a home in its branches. Although the Kingdom of God and the Church are not the same thing, it can work to reflect the Kingdom of God.

First of all no small action is without consequence and no witness is inconsequential. This is a word of encouragement to small congregations who think themselves unable to make a difference in their community, let alone in the kingdom of God. Not so! What is small, if it is of God, will grow! God's church will grow so that "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

There is also a challenge to the Church in this parable. In Jesus' time this parable would have caused people to rise to their feet in anger, rend their clothing, and throw ashes or dust into the air. Why? It seems like such a sweet parable. A tiny seed grows into something large and significant and little birds come, build nests, and raise a family. It sounds so pastoral. What would have possibly upset people so? "Birds of the air" was, in that day, a euphemism for gentiles – non Jews. The very idea that the Kingdom of God would be inclusive went against the grain of everything they understood about being a covenant people. And yet, Jesus' parable tells us that everyone is welcomed into the Kingdom of God. May it be so for the Church.

Which would best describe how you are sowing the seed?

- Not at all.**
- I tend to remove one little seed from the bag of seeds and carefully place it in the ground.**
- I am willing to broadcast the seed, but I won't waste it. I will only broadcast it when the soil all around me is ready to receive it.**
- I broadcast it all over the place and let God take care of the condition of the soil.**

Explain why you chose that answer.

Day Three

Read Mark 5

Consider Mark 5:1-20. In the healing of the man called Legion, there are many lessons for the modern disciple:

- † First of all, faith in Jesus makes a difference. By the power of the living God, prisoners are set free from chemical and emotional addictions, from every condition that frustrates God's will in His human creation. Legion lives out the Biblical promise: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see? Everything has become new!" (2Cor.5:17)
- † Yet, as the Parable of the Sower so aptly illustrates, Legion's healing prompts very different responses. The swineherds spread the story, the people come running. They see "the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind," and – it says – "they were afraid." God's obvious part in the healing of such a hard case results, not in praise and worship, but in a request that Jesus and his company leave them alone! While we might expect, on first reading, for an outburst of faith and discipleship, the opposite occurs. One never knows the condition of the soil into which the seed falls.
- † As for Legion, he is ready to follow Jesus as a disciple for the rest of his days, as one would expect. What is not expected is Jesus' turning him away, or better – turning him towards home. "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you," commands Jesus. Jesus is not turning the former Legion down but giving him his first assignment as a disciple. The "Go" here is the same "Go" of Matthew 28. No matter where our discipleship takes us, as with

every journey, it always starts at home! Sometimes these are the hardest people to share faith with, as they know us so well. We may not be the ones to lead non-believing family members to Christ, but our witness to them is still essential. Read the first two chapters of John's gospel, and see how faith sharing so often follows the natural channels of home and neighborhood. Andrew, on meeting Jesus, first shares his good news with Simon, his brother. Philip does the same with his friend, Nathaniel. The first of Jesus' miracles occurs near his home, in Cana. "Go home," Jesus says to Legion, "to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you."

Legion's experience was so powerful and so life-changing that he could not help but share it. You may not have had such a dramatic experience with Jesus, but there is probably some way Jesus has made a difference in your life.

In the safety of your small group, share a way or a time Jesus made a difference in your life. Jot down a few notes below.

Day Four Read Mark 6

- **All Nations**

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...

Our authority to share Jesus reaches the whole world, all peoples, cultures, and languages. John Wesley responded to a local parish in England that barred him from preaching for being “too enthusiastic” by saying, “the whole world is my parish.” Today, after the start of the Wesleyan movement 250 years ago, the Methodist Church is expanding in more than 145 countries, with over 2,300 missionaries participating in almost 3,000 ministries.

This may be a daunting idea for many people – reaching every nation for Christ. There are two significant miracles in Mark 6 that can give us hope for accomplishing such a monumental task: the miracles of Jesus feeding the five thousand and walking on the water.

First, consider Mark 6:30-44. Jesus was an amazing teacher and people flocked to him from all parts of Galilee to listen and learn from him. On this particular day he had the rapt attention of the crowd far into the day until it was past supper time. The disciples ask that they be sent away to eat, but Jesus insists that the disciples provide them with a meal lest they faint from hunger while on route to home. This idea is outrageous – impossible – to the disciples. Among them they only have 5 loaves of bread and two dried fish. How can that little bit of food feed so many?

Then Jesus asks the disciples to seat the people on the ground in groups of 50 and to bring him the bread and fish. He blesses it, begins to divide it, and a miracle happens. The fish and loaves multiply again and again and again

until every man, woman, and child has had their fill. In fact the leftovers fill 12 baskets. Once counted, 5000 men had been fed – and that does not include the women and children.

The miracle that follows in verses 45-52 should have clenched it for the disciples. Again we see the humanity and fallibility of the disciples. They were stunned and frightened by the sight of Jesus walking toward them on a stormy sea. There was no other explanation than that Jesus was coming to them as a ghost.

There are many people today who only see the handiwork of God when it comes in the form of a miracle. They look for a miracle and when they do not see one, they cannot see God. The disciples have the opposite problem. Because the disciples do not comprehend who it is that walks in their midst, the appearance of a miracle surprises them. To feed such a crowd was impossible to them, as it was for Jesus to come to them in the storm except as a ghost. Yet under his tutelage the people are fed and the disciples survive the storm with Jesus in their boat. In the case of the miraculous feeding, something as small as a mustard seed is amplified beyond belief, namely 5 loaves of bread and 2 dried fish.

Where do you see God at work in the miracle of reaching all nations with the reality and love of Christ?

What part do you play in that miracle?

- **Baptizing them**

...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

Not only are we to make disciples of all nations, we are given the instruction to baptize them, that is, to share with them the means of grace **before** they can prove their worthiness to be Christians. Grace abounds on our behalf before we are aware of it. The new Christian is baptized in the name of the Trinity, the one God, who is the perfect communion of the three relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What higher authority may we have than that?!

- **Teach them to Obey**

... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

The teaching of the disciple makes the difference between a community of disciples and a list of members on a church's roll. Teaching the disciple takes time, and the teaching demands the response of our obedience to what we have learned. The option is always open to whether or not we choose to follow. Yet it is better to know the claims of the Gospel at the beginning, rather than later. The challenge of churches in renewal today, is the realization that many of their members have joined the church without being aware of the claims of Christian discipleship and their vocation as ministers of Christ's outreaching love. The challenge for the American church today is to help members become disciples.

There is a natural division in the Gospel story between Jesus calling the disciples and Jesus sending them. First, he calls; then, he sends. In Mark 1-5, the emphasis is on the calling and training of the disciples. With chapter 6 the focus shifts to the sending of the disciples out two by two. Could they have had more preparation? Of course, but the time comes, sooner than later, when in spite of all their limitations, they are to put their discipleship into practice by telling others. And even this is a way to teach and to learn. They go out in twos for encouragement and support. It is still a good strategy. Jesus gives them authority. They have none of their own. They will preach with power and be able to drive out evil spirits and to heal the sick so long as they are doing his work and not their own. One cannot exaggerate the risk Jesus takes in sending his disciples out to preach and to heal. They do not understand his teaching. They do not trust his care for them. And yet no disciple, ancient or modern, is ever ready. We come to understand the Gospel by proclaiming it; we learn to trust by trusting. The place to take risks is not in the church but in the world.

**Christians spend too much time with Christians.
Why is that?**

The home, the neighborhood, the place of work and play – these are the places of Christian witness! What would it take for you to be able to move into the world of the unchurched and be a Christian witness?

Day Five

- **I am with you Always**

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

In the second storm which Mark tells about there is an interesting reference. Jesus sent the disciples on ahead to Bethsaida by boat, while he stayed behind to pray. A strong wind arose and Jesus set out himself across the lake, Mark tells us, by foot and not by boat. As he approached the boat, his intention was to pass them by. (See verse 48) Was he testing them? Did he see that they were able to handle the wind and sea on their own? There have been lots of storms that Jesus has not stilled for his followers. His disciples are not without skill in handling boats. There are some things we can handle ourselves, knowing that God loves us, is with us, and that there is a purpose and a destiny running through our lives. The disciples however see Jesus and they are “terrified.” It was the walking on the water that frightened them. God’s presence in our midst often disturbs our peace and our presumptions! “Take heart,” says Jesus, “It is I.” - clearly referencing to God’s self-revelation as the Great I Am.

Jesus promises that whatever happens to us physically or any other way and no matter the circumstance, he will be with us forever. Once again, this is evidence that Jesus moves in kairos. We surrender to this truth, yet do we really believe it and depend upon it? This means that whatever mission-evangelization ministry we are in, as we are faithful, we cannot fail, even if it costs us our physical lives, because Jesus is always with us.

It is easy to be critical of the first disciples’ apparent inability to see what is so obvious to us. Remember that we know how the story turns out! It is one thing to read the story knowing already about the cross and resurrection, and something else to live the story every day as the disciples did. For us, the cross and resurrection, however, may be too far in our past. Faith, for us, can deteriorate to a “once upon a time” attitude and not a daily walk with a living Christ. In other words, we share the same spiritual DNA with the first disciples, needing to constantly depend on God to give us the wisdom to understand and the strength to persevere.

What, for you, is the hardest part of living the story every day as the disciples did?

Questions to Consider as a Group

Jesus was an evangelist of the Kingdom of God. Following his baptism by John, Jesus began a preaching and

teaching ministry that had the “good news of the kingdom” as its center. In the original Greek “good news” is *evangelia*, which is the root of our word “evangelism.” The good news was the coming and the closeness of God’s reign – The Kingdom of God. He calls the disciples to follow him in extending God’s Reign over all persons and circumstances. Our mission is not to grow the church but to grow God’s Kingdom! The Church is, to be sure, of God, but it is very human indeed and only a tool of the Kingdom. When God’s Kingdom comes in its fullness, there will be no Church. (See Revelation 21:22)

What are the differences between growing the Kingdom of God and growing the Church?

The role of the disciple is to act in obedience under the authority of Christ, broadcasting the seed which is the Word of God, trusting God’s provision and providence, particularly in the stormy times.

How would we act if we really believed this? How would our church be different if we really believed this?

According to Dr. George Hunter in “Church for the Unchurched,” (1996, Abingdon Press) there are two kinds of churches. There are churches for church people. These are the traditional 1950-model churches described above. They are strong in denominational loyalty. Membership training consists largely in acquainting people with the polity and politics of the denomination, rather than teaching basic Christianity. In other words, they are not equipped spiritually or programmatically to welcome unchurched people. The other kind of church, according to Dr. Hunter, are churches for unchurched people. Such churches are characterized by an apostolic faith focused in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ, and an apostolic outreach to unchurched people employing the language and music of the people they are called to reach. If they have a denominational identity, they are on the edge of their denomination.

How would you rate your congregation – as a church for church people (traditional) or as a church for unchurched people (missionary)?

In many traditional churches serving God and serving on a church committee are synonymous. Missionary churches send people into the world to serve.

What part of God’s world do you feel sent into? Does your church help you serve God there? What could your church do to better equip you?