



## Widening Our Scope

1 Cor. 9:16-23 & Mark 1:29-39

Ordinary 5 - February 4, 2024

Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

This past week, I read an article by the great biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann entitled: 'Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World.' Amongst the uniquely profound commentary on the state of the church and our ability to hear the gospel or ignore it, Brueggemann offers this:

**The preacher in US culture deals with a claim that is commonly accepted as truth by the listeners. That is, we preach mostly to believers. There is a casual, indifferent readiness, even in our increasingly secularized society, to grant the main claims of the gospel – not to grant them**

**importance but accept them as premises of religious life. In fact, it is precisely the problem for the proclamation of the gospel that the great claims of the gospel do not seem to be problematic or in question.**

**The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing, that asks little and receives less.**

Brueggemann makes a point that we miss at our peril; do we really hear the gospel in its fullness, in its complete proclamation of what God has done in Jesus Christ and then respond appropriately to its call and claim upon us or do we just think these are the kind of things that we just talk about in church; there is no real correlation to our lives or even how we are the church in this world.

This short little passage from the Gospel of Mark relates something so important, so vital about life with God and life in Christ's church that we risk much if we fail to hear it or overlook it wedged in the midst of everything else that is happening in the pericope.

Here's the scene: Jesus has been busy the day before with all the healing and teaching and early on the next morning, he is out in a secluded spot in prayer. The disciples, led by Simon Peter are desperately searching for him; like the handlers of some political candidate who want their man to keep on schedule and not delay the buses, the disciples are desperate to find him.

Once Jesus is found, his response to their entreaties is to rise off his knees and remind them of his purpose. He tells them that they won't be staying here anymore but will widen the scope of the message he brings to the surrounding villages and the hillsides of the Galilee. In

the midst of Jesus' isolation and seclusion, the world comes crashing in and he determines to go out to meet it, doing the very thing to which he has been called by God.

Sometimes, we are tempted as a church and as a people, to seek and desire seclusion and quiet meditation rather than heed the call of God to be with and for this world in meaningful and purposeful ways. It is a great and common temptation for the church to do just that: satisfy our own spiritual needs and neglect the call that is upon our lives to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a world so badly in need of the healing touch of the living Christ.

Not too many years ago, I visited a church in our presbytery that sought to leave our denomination. I listened, along with other colleagues sent for the purpose of listening, to all their woes and tales of how the denomination had deserted them and had neglected the real Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now they wanted only to break ties from this heretical organization and be left alone to pursue being a church in their community, unfettered with ties to the outside world.

Though I understood their complaints, I came to realize that there was something else that was at the heart of their concern: their anger with the Presbyterian Church was only the presenting problem, as counselors are trained to say. It was only the surface issue and not the real heart of the matter. That church wanted to retreat fully and completely into an enclave of like-minded individuals who would always agree with one another on most things and especially on what the church should be and do. They just didn't want to get mixed up with 'external concerns,' as one of their own elders named it.

Yet, this passage, with its honest representation of Jesus Christ's desire to widen the scope of the gospel and reach out to the world in which he lived should be our byword, as it were, when we consider to what we are being called as a church and as a people of God. If the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not propel us out into the wider world of our fellow humanity, then it is not the gospel of Christ that we are hearing!

I really like what John Buchanan, retired pastor of the great Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago said:

**[The church is] not called to simply exist. We are not called to just survive. We are not even called to be successful. We are called, as churches, to be faithful to Jesus Christ and to serve the world as he served it, to love the world as he loved it, to give our lives away to the world as he gave his life away. The resources to live, to exist, and to survive are given to us by God, not so much as we become more efficient, more economical, more astute at raising funds and conserving our resources (as important as that is), but precisely as we discover that the reason for the church's being is simply mission.**

In this passage from Mark, we see clearly that the model for discipleship that we receive from Jesus Christ is one that embraces God's call to reach out to this world, not to form an closed enclave of like-minded individuals, but to follow our Lord out into this world and offer the grace and love that we have received in Christ to a world badly in need of this healing message.

So, let us rise from our knees and our prayerful devotion to God and follow the living Christ out into a world that he has already embraced in his life, death and resurrection; let us widen our scope just as he did in Galilee and beyond those borders and boundaries. It is what the gospel calls us to do ... always.