

“Shhhh....Don’t Tell!”

Mark 5.21-43

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 6-29-03

Beginning with last week’s story of Jesus stilling the storm – in which he contrasts faith and trust – we’re beginning a cycle of readings in the lectionary that come from the Gospel According to Mark. (The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year continual series of texts that are used by most mainline Protestant churches in the U.S., so the scripture you hear today is probably the one your neighbors at St. Paul’s Episcopal and Our Savior’s Lutheran and Harmony Presbyterian are hearing, too.)

So, I wanted to give you a little background on Mark’s gospel, which was the first of the four gospels in our canon to be written, probably in the late 60s, or about 35 years after Jesus was crucified. It was also a source for the writers of Matthew’s and Luke’s gospel.

We don’t know who wrote the text, but we can surmise that he was from a Jewish background, though he had plenty of knowledge of Roman customs and thought, leading some to believe that the gospel was written in Syria or even in Italy.

But Mark’s gospel has a unique flavor: it’s language is a bit rough, unrefined, and parochial. And there are no stories of a miraculous birth or of the resurrection. The teachings of Jesus are hardly mentioned, unlike Matthew’s and Luke’s account. And Jesus certainly wasn’t a pre-existent being, as he is in John’s gospel.

Jesus, for the writer of this early gospel, is a wonder-worker, the messiah who is promised by God in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is accorded such titles as “Son of God,” just as Solomon had been, and “Son of Man,” which connotes a cosmic presence that will come to judge the world.

But, here’s the twist Jesus came as the *suffering* Son of God: there is emphasis on his suffering and death, but none at all on his resurrection.

Another recurring element in Mark’s gospel, one which we heard at the very end of this morning’s reading, is the so-called “Messianic Secret.” Jesus keeps trying to hide his identity, kind of like Clark Kent or Bruce Wayne not wanting to have people know they were really superheroes. “Shhhh,” Jesus keeps saying, “Don’t tell!” This passage today concludes: “He strictly ordered them that no one should know this.”¹ “Say nothing to anyone,” says Jesus in the first chapter.² And when Peter arrives at the conclusion that Jesus is the messiah, the anointed one, Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”³

This secret is something of a bizarre twist to the way Mark’s gospel tells the story of Jesus, and we’ll come back to it in a bit.

Again, we have two wonderful stories of miraculous healing: the woman with the hemorrhage and the restoration of life to Jairus’s daughter. It’s not accidental that these two occasions surround people who were considered “disposable” by the culture of Jesus’ day. Women, and especially female children, were second-class citizens in that era. Moreover, according to Torah, any woman who is menstruating is ritually unclean for

¹ Mk 5.43

² Mk 1.43

³ Mk 8.30

seven days.⁴ So, this woman who has had hemorrhaging for twelve years is an outcast, and an untouchable. Yet, Jesus heals them both.

What the woman does, in reaching out to touch Jesus is forbidden by Jewish purity laws: she is unclean and she touches his garment, defiling it. Jesus notices right away, he “feels the power had gone forth from him” and he asks, “Who touched my clothes?” When the woman admits that she had touched his robe, Jesus doesn’t condemn her, rather he addresses her as a member of his family: “daughter,” and says that her faith – her trust – has made her well.

In this way, Jesus is turning the notion of purity on it’s head: he’s reversing the conventional wisdom of his day and replacing purity with compassion. Marcus Borg has written extensively on this, and concludes: “Jesus deliberately replaced the core value of purity with compassion. Compassion, not . . . [purity] is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors God.”⁵

So, what is the good news for the people of Jesus’ day? For the people who were healed, it’s that he was a miraculous healer. But, what’s the good news for the rest of us? Jesus’ healing doesn’t play a large part in most of our lives in the same sense that it did for Jairus’s daughter. For some of those who heard Jesus, he was the messiah, the anointed one. But, surely a very tiny minority of people around Jesus held this opinion. After his death and resurrection, though, the opinion spread that he was the messiah, and it was only then that he was given the appellation Christ or *christos* which is Greek for messiah.

For all who came into contact with him, who heard him, who knew of his intimate connection with God – there was more good news. Here was someone people could put their faith in, someone they could trust absolutely, a man who espoused compassion as God’s primary message for humankind, someone who brought a means through by which we could come into deeper relationship with God.

So, what is the good news for you today? Is it that God cared so much for humanity that he sent Jesus to proclaim God’s liberating kingdom? That Jesus life and ministry and continuing presence gives you a way to see God more clearly? That Jesus **is** the messiah promised in the Hebrew Bible?

Or perhaps the good news for you is knowing that there are no outcasts – not even you! – and that we have an incredible model of compassion. Or even that God reaches out to humankind continually through the Holy Spirit. That you are invited into relationship with God through prayer and worship.

Maybe the good news for you is somewhat less esoteric, or perhaps it comes most clearly into view in our own local church. **Why are you here at Plymouth?** What is it that brings you here, rather than to St. Joseph’s or Resurrection Fellowship? Stop and think about that: *why are you here at Plymouth?* There must be some fairly strong force that drew you here and is keeping you here.

Is it that you have a faith community that extends to you a sense of belonging? That we act for social justice and the integrity of creation as a matter of faith. That you are part of a congregation in which you are not asked to check your brain at the door on Sunday morning. That we are a progressive church where you are responsible for interpreting the Bible in a way that makes sense to you. That your kids have a first-rate youth education program and you have access to one of the premier adult ed. programs in the UCC and probably the best among all the churches in Ft. Collins. Some of you probably just like the orange carpet in the sanctuary.

⁴ Lev 12.2

⁵ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 54.

The list could go on and on; I'm sure that there are a lot of ways you perceive the good news that I didn't even mention.

And now I want you to think of something else: who first brought you to church? Whether as a child, an adolescent, or as an adult, who was it that first brought you to church? And who first invited you to Plymouth?

So, here's the question: Why is Plymouth still the best-kept secret in Ft. Collins? Did someone come up to each of us "strictly order us to tell no one" that Plymouth is an incredible church with a lot to offer? Or did God come to you in the night and order you to "say nothing to anyone"? Of course not!

And it isn't just Plymouth, of course, it's the whole of the United Church of Christ. We aren't good at blowing our own horns, and that's probably just fine – as long as it keeps us *humble* but not *invisible*. We don't claim to have a corner on the market of salvation, as some of our more conservative brethren do: we don't claim that ours is the *only way*.

The trouble is that most of us are not even willing to state publicly that our faith is *a way*. There's the irony: each of us has found a home, but we're not willing to invite others in because we don't want to offend them and have them think we're like some other churches that make exclusive claims about who is saved and who is damned. (My dad used to say that there are two kinds of people in the world: the unrighteous and the self-righteous: the self-righteous do the classifying.) But, this isn't about judgment!

The fact that you are sitting here means that there must be something pretty significant going on for you at Plymouth, whether it's being in relationship with God or with others in this community of faith, and hopefully both. So, why on earth wouldn't you want to share that with others? D.T. Niles, who was a leader of the Church of South India, once wrote, "Christian evangelism is not sharing our bounty: Christians have no bounty. It is one beggar telling another where to find bread."

So, why not share bread with another person who is hungry for connection with God? There is no "messianic secret" about life at Plymouth. We are a progressive, open and affirming, Protestant church that values the heart and the mind in approaching faith. We have ample bread to feed people who need nourishment.

It's not just the job of our evangelism committee to go out and advertise to get new members, though they do that. ***It's up to each of us.*** The single most effective means of inviting new members into the church is for you to ask someone you know to join you at Plymouth some Sunday.

Evangelism ***isn't*** forcing someone to come to a service where they will be spiritually bludgeoned or threatened: it's ***inviting*** someone to share an aspect of your life that gives it meaning. And that's what a lot of people are looking for: *faith that gives life meaning*.

I know that a few weeks back, Dick asked you to consider asking a friend of acquaintance if they attend another church, and if not, invite them to Plymouth. I think that's a great idea.

It's up to you to think about a person that needs bread, who needs to share in the goodness of our common life of faith, who needs the spiritual oasis of a church where they can think and explore their spirituality. Our job is to extend a warm invitation and a sense of ***extravagant welcome***, which is what God offers each of us.

There are a lot of people, especially Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and even younger adults who are looking for a community of faith where they can walk their journey of faith: they just don't know about us. In many ways, I think the United Church is perfectly poised for seekers: we just need to invite them.

What is it that keeps you from inviting a friend to Plymouth? Is it that you've never thought to do so? Perhaps it seems intrusive, after all religion is a pretty intimate subject (but so is love). Maybe you don't want to be pushy. (Well, don't be! An invitation isn't pushy.) I'd encourage each of us to leave our comfort zones momentarily and ask someone to join us at Plymouth some Sunday.

There is no "messianic secret" at Plymouth, so spread some of the good news; we have plenty of bread, and people are hungry. Amen.