

Sermon: Epiphany V

Mr. Evans DeVries

February 8, 2015

Year B

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

I would like to begin, this morning, by welcoming Kevin Barry back to the lay preaching fold. I enjoyed his sermon last month and have to report that my own household inventory came up with a slight edge for evidence of Christianity, but far too little for me to take any pride in the “score”. We are working on that. Although, with all the deer using my yard as a buffet, the casual observer would probably think that St. Francis lived in my house, but that is a whole other story.

When I first read today’s gospel reading, a couple of things caught my attention, immediately. Then, as I began reading the commentaries, I became aware of some other aspects of this passage. Among them is the pace of Mark’s gospel. We are a mere 40 verses into it, as James Boyce points out, and, already, John the Baptizer has appeared, Jesus has been baptized and praised by the Father, and He has begun to call disciples. Last week he began the Galilean ministry by teaching, preaching and casting out a demon in the synagog in Capernaum. Today’s reading finishes Day One in Jesus’s ministry with the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law. After sundown and the end of the sabbath, we begin day two of Christ’s ministry with healing and casting out more demons. The latter is a huge amount of activity in the confines of what we would call one day. After reading the commentaries, I also was struck by the fact that this is what the world, realize it or not, was waiting for. In Christ, the Kingdom of God is near. Today’s passage also defines the purpose of Christ’s ministry. Yes, He has created a sensation of sorts with his healing and casting out of unclean spirits, and He could become a local celebrity by continuing to heal. But healing, like the other miracles, just suggests to the crowd, the nature of His authority. At the end of today’s passage, Jesus

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

If I might, I would like to return to the very first thing that caught my attention when I read this passage: silencing the unclean spirits. On the Christian blog, Faith Forward, Alyce McKensie, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Southern Methodist University, points out that throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus continually avoids being identified as the messiah. He silences the unclean spirits in 1:25,34; and 3:11. He tells the cleansed leper in 1:44, the leader of the synagog whose daughter he raises from the dead in 5:43, the deaf man whom he heals in 7:36 and the blind man that he heals in Bethsaida in 8:26 not to say anything. He even tells his apostles not to say who he is. When Peter acknowledges him as the messiah in 8:30 and Peter, James and John also do after the Transfiguration, He tells them to tell no one. It doesn’t always work, to be sure. The first demon did identify Christ in the synagog in Capernaum, in last week’s reading. The cleansed leper in 1:45, also “blabs” his story to everyone. This pattern of secrecy was labeled the “messianic secret” by Lutheran theologian William Wrede in 1901, and he developed an elaborate theory to explain it. The theory contained elements that have fallen out of favor, now, and Wrede’s theory has been replaced by several alternative explanations.

So, why the secrecy? Why not just let everyone know who Jesus is? Well, there are several proposed answers. First, the popular idea of a messiah, in that day, was the polar opposite of Jesus. People, then, expected that “salvation” would be ridding them from Roman occupation. Unfortunately, the one who came to atone for the sins of the world by dying on the cross definitely didn’t fit the conquering hero or warrior mold. Second, it was not, yet, the time for Jesus to be revealed. The time line was not Jesus’s to alter. A third proposed reason for secrecy was to avoid the type of notoriety that occurred when the cleansed leper told of his healing and the pressure of the crowds forced Jesus to stay away from town. It was much easier for Him to travel, teach and preach if He were more anonymous. The exegitic school of Madrid suggested that,

actually, the texts were mistranslated and Jesus didn't order secrecy. Another view, on the silencing of demons, is to avoid what would almost appear to be their endorsement, as last week when the demon in the Capernaum synagog knew that Jesus was "the holy one of God". Wrede's full theory went beyond just secrecy, but these more common sense reasons seem to cover most currently accepted reasons for "messianic secrecy".

Earlier I said that two points caught my attention about this passage. The second point involves the story of Simon Peter's Mother-in-law. All of the women in my life are and have been, strong women. Maybe I have become sensitized to the stereotyped role of women as a result. The raised woman immediately serving the men jumped out at me, in today's terms, as politically incorrect, to say the very least! That was until I read Sarah Henrich's comments on the internet. Pastor Henrich is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at the Luther Seminary in Chicago. She points out that, among all those healed by Jesus, Simon Peter's mother-in-law responded by serving. The Greek verb that describes her response is the same one used by Jesus to describe His ministry. To quote Professor Henrich, "Simon Peter's mother-in-law is far from being an exemplar of a pathetic, unliberated woman for whom serving men is her whole life. Rather, she is the first character in Mark's gospel who exemplifies true discipleship". Another commentary that I read asked, when you are healed or cured, what do you do to show gratitude to God? That's a good question!