

So, I may have bitten off more than I could chew on this Sunday - and I'm not referring to what my eating habits may or may not be at the potluck meal after the annual meeting!

I have found myself thoroughly enjoying moving sequentially through the gospel of Mark. Last week, you may recall us moving through a lot of parables Jesus told - laying everyday recognizable events and items side by side with truths about the kingdom of God. He openly shared that he did not think that "outsiders" would get much out of his teaching stories, but that he would take care to explain them to his inner circle, so that they would be sure to grasp what he was teaching them...and thereby increasing their faith in him.

Today's texts follow on the heels of these parables. And while they are not explicitly couched as parables, these two stories--the crossing of the sea and the healing of the person possessed with demons--certainly serve the purpose of encouraging the witnesses to increase their faith. As Jesus says in the midst of offering the parable:

"Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

"Pay attention to what you hear;
the measure you give will be the measure you get,
and still more will be given you."

Today, we are celebrating the call to be a follower of Jesus. We have recalled what it means to be swept up in the same baptism as Jesus. We have renewed the varieties of ways we serve the church as its members. In just a few minutes we will recognize the special call that God has placed on us to serve the church with a more concentrated focus...as a deacon or as an elder. In our stories today, we are implored to see how weighty is the call to follow Jesus, and how it is not a call to smooth sailing; nor how it is intended to place us safe and sound in the company of “sane” community. Let me repeat Jesus words:

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

“Pay attention to what you hear;

the measure you give will be the measure you get...

and still more will be given you.”

In Mark’s narrative, the disciples have just listened to all of these examples about how to faithfully dwell in God’s kingdom, when they embark to go to “the other side.” On face value, it is a trip in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. However, the story is fraught with symbolism. Going to the “other side” of the sea means going into “non-Jewish” territory. It is one thing for Jesus to be preaching about the “kingdom of God” to people steeped in Jewish history, who may have been looking forward to the coming of a messiah. And it is something quite different for a group of people for whom that is not the expectation, and quite frankly, who are “unclean.”

If we have any doubts about the “unclean” nature of this voyage, all we need do is look at the clues. Immediately when they step off the boat they are confronted by a demented person, who spends their time amongst the tombs. Throw in the fact that the demons are eventually released into a company of swine, and it is pretty clear that the disciples have come way outside of their comfort zone. Some commentaries point out that the fact that the person is “possessed by Legions” could be a reference to the fact that the area was also heavily occupied by troops of Roman soldiers (a company of soldiers = 1000). The pigs drowning in the sea could even be a nod back to the Exodus when Pharaoh’s army fell victim to the closing Red Sea as they chased the escaping Israelites.

So, we have layers of unclean Gentiles with whom Jesus and his companions are associating. “Could this situation be part of the kingdom of God?” they may have wondered. In their minds it probably didn’t add up.

Once they get past the shock that Jesus has actually engaged the so-called “demoniac,” they must have been riveted to the action. The encounter is relatively quick (that’s how Mark is ...everything happens “immediately”!). The occupied person actually runs up to Jesus and bows, paying homage to Jesus. Mark is not clear about whose voice comes from the person, but it seems to be the demons: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” Jesus has already commanded them to free the person. Jesus grants them the wish of possessing the pigs. There’s an interlude in which the pigs (all 2000 of them!) run into the sea, and the swineherds go and tell anyone who will listen

what happened. (I can't imagine they were very pleased about it, as their charges were now belly-up in the sea). When the people who heard about it went to see Jesus, they found the formerly possessed person to be clothed and in their right mind. Then the crowd promptly insisted that Jesus to get out of town!

Behold the power of Jesus: to free those bound by powers and principalities; to piss off a whole bunch of people; and to be shown no gratitude. Some people don't want to change no matter how bound they are to life as they know it. Jesus also had the willpower to turn away the sane person who requested to travel with Jesus' company. Instead, Jesus bade them to stay on "their side" of the sea, and to let "their" people see in them the power of Jesus to heal and restore. Quite a responsibility! **"The measure you give will be the measure you get and still more will be given you."**

If not a parable, still the desire of the one set free by Jesus was a prime example of the kingdom being present on earth. And for a group of disciples who had trouble conjuring up faith on the churning sea, this episode must have provided a small measure of encouragement. They did after all get back in the boat and go back across, in spite of the harrowing voyage they experienced on their way to the "other side."

In the time I have remaining, I want to explore that story for just a moment, but in a slightly different context. I wish us to examine it as a parable for our time.

For such a time we have been “in the boat” with Jesus -- as a household of people we have, for the most part, enjoyed the journey of the Church. It is fascinating to me that Mark says this: “And leaving the crowd behind, they took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was (*I’d love to know what that means?!?*). Other boats were with him.” We believe that we are in the boat with Jesus. We also know there are other boats with Jesus...St. Mark’s Presbyterian, Noble Road Presbyterian, Faith United Church of Christ, Messiah Lutheran Church, St. Pascal’s Roman Catholic Church... So many boats with Jesus! Mark doesn’t tell us that those boats got caught up in the big storm, and that those “sailors” were so frightened that they called upon Jesus to help them. But I have to believe many of those boats were caught up in the storm, as well. In the story, we see Jesus’ willingness to speak to the wind and the waves and to call on them to “Be still,” to create “Peace” in the midst of fear.

He asks the travelers, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” The followers flat out ignored his question. Instead the episode ends with the disciples being “filled with great awe and (saying) to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” No doubt, this is a fair question. And one worth asking over and over again: “Who then is this that even the wind and sea obey?” When the folks on the other side of the lake measured up who it was that could pull a Legion of demons out of a person and send them into a company of pigs, they determined that “whoever this was” needed to depart from their midst. At least the disciples, in their awe, remained with him.

Still it would serve them well to return to the question: *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* In our own turbulent times we too may be feeling afraid. I certainly am worried about the fate of the church (small c and big C). I would like, no, LOVE to wake Jesus up and be told that everything is going to be okay (hopefully meaning, “it’s all going to go as easily as possible”). But we cannot underestimate the witness of scripture that tells us that RARELY does following Jesus equate to a smooth path, where things stay status quo! Searching for the kingdom of God is not an intuitive search, nor is it a straight-forward quest. But pay attention to what happened immediately after the disciples were filled with fear - they were thrust into a situation in which the kingdom was glimpsed. It was messy, it was tense, it was unpopular, it was uncomfortable. And yet it was liberating. And not just for the person who was freed from the demons. Remember what Jesus told the person: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy (God) has shown you.” (Remember that saying about not holding one’s light under a bushel basket?!?) So that they too may have “ears to hear” and seek to gain faith in God through Christ Jesus.

Chris Hill recently told me something her father said to Chris’ brother as their dad was nearing death. He said that he could hear music like nothing he had ever heard before, and that there was a crowd of people all around, and he could tell that it was all about “something big.” Chris said her brother didn’t ask for too many details, but all he knew was that their father was confident

that whatever that “something big” was, it was good; and he wasn’t afraid to die. In fact, now he was anticipating it - wanting to find out why that crowd had gathered and what that strange but beautiful music was all about.

Today we have renewed our call to follow Jesus; to bear witness to the power of Jesus. Are we still invested? Do we have faith that the power of Christ is still at work in the world, through the Holy Spirit? Then let us pick back the mantle of the disciples, with renewed strength and vigor, and attend to the needs of the world with Jesus...knowing that the cross is costly...and yet with the certainty that engaging in the effort will present to us “something big;” even as we live. What’s in it for us is, no less, the opportunity to dwell in the kingdom of God. And, that is powerful beyond all of our imaginations. Let’s continue to travel with Jesus, and see where we are led. Amen.