

Epiphany 5 (B)

Mk 1.29-39

One of the temptations we face as Christians has to do with our tendency to want to shrink the gospel down to something manageable. What I mean is this: living a faithful life can sometimes be a real challenge, and one of the ways we often try and deal with that challenge is to narrow the parameters of the faith.

For example, we might try and turn the gospel into a moral principle: we'll say, "Well, Christianity is really about treating other people the way you want to be treated, so I'll just try my best to be nice to everyone and to help out when I can, and then I'll be living a faithful life."

Or we might try and turn the gospel into a set of propositions: we'll say, "Well, Christianity is really about believing certain things about God and Jesus, so I'll think about God in a particular way and then I'll be living a faithful life."

Or we might try and turn the gospel into a set of religious practices: we'll say, "Well, Christianity is really about fulfilling one's religious duty, so I'll go to church every Sunday and then I'll be living a faithful life."

But the challenge today's gospel lesson puts before us is that the life of faith can't be reduced to any one thing. We can't reduce the gospel to a moral code or a set of beliefs or a list of religious duties without losing something essential. The challenge this story from Mark puts before us is that the gospel bears on every area of our lives; there is no part of us, no dimension of our lives that we should not open to the saving power of God.

Now, where am I getting this? How does our gospel lesson present this image of the life of faith? Consider for a moment all of the things we see Jesus doing in this story from Mark. He's just come from the synagogue, where he's been teaching. He goes to the house of Simon Peter and he heals Simon's mother, and later that day, after the word gets around that there's a healer in town, he heals people from all over the city.

Then what does he do? He leaves the city and goes out to a deserted place to be alone with God and to pray. And that time of solitude and prayer helps him prepare for the next stage of his ministry; he tells his disciples he's leaving Capernaum to preach the gospel throughout Galilee. And off he goes.

So we see Jesus doing several things. We see him *teaching* people about the coming of the kingdom; he gives them a message they can believe. We see him *healing* people and delivering them from the powers of death and darkness; he brings about both physical and spiritual transformation. We see him *in prayer*, spending time alone with God; he cultivates his own life of faith. And we see him *going out* into the world to proclaim the gospel; he takes the message and the gifts God has given to him and he offers them to the world.

And the thing to note is that, for Jesus, all of these things are bound up with one another. His

approach to the life of faith is comprehensive; it's not just for the head or for the heart or for the body, but for all of them simultaneously. The gospel he proclaims is one that promises transformation at every level; it's a gospel of salvation for the whole person, and not just the individual person, but for the person in relation to other persons.

Do you see why this is a challenge for us? In our day and age, we've learned to compartmentalize our lives. We put our family in one compartment, and our job in another compartment, and our hobbies in another compartment, and our faith in another compartment, and we split up our lives into little pieces in the hopes that doing so will help us be more effective. We manage our lives instead of living our lives. We even do the same thing with ourselves: we put our mind in one compartment, and our heart in another compartment, and our bodies in another compartment.

We do this not only as individuals, but as a culture. We don't just *distinguish* between the public and the private, we *divide* the public and the private. We put God in the "private" compartment and politics in the "public" compartment. We don't just *distinguish* between faith and reason, we *divide* them; faith is fine for those who need to believe or those who want to believe, but the real world is about reason. And then, having split all these things apart, we have a hard time reconciling what we see as the mutually exclusive demands of reason and faith, the public and the private, the secular and the sacred. We end up living a divided life in a divided world.

This kind of compartmentalization is a real problem when it comes to the life of faith. If we confine our faith to one area of our lives, we may find it easy to be faithful in that one area but not in others. It may seem perfectly obvious how our faith bears on one part of our experience, but we may have little to no idea how our faith bears on other areas of our experience.

Today's gospel challenges us to rethink this kind of compartmentalization. The good news of Jesus Christ is not something that bears on one little area of our lives; it's something that bears on *every* area of our lives. It bears on our hearts, and it bears on our minds, and it bears on our bodies. It bears on our private, individual experience, and it bears on our public, social experience. It bears on our families and our jobs and our free time and our finances. The gospel has something to say to every dimension of our lives.

This will sound to us either like a promise or a threat. We may not particularly *want* to open up every area of our lives to the gospel, and if that's the case the gospel will sound like threat. We may be very comfortable thinking of faith as something that only has to do with one little corner of our lives; we know where faith belongs and where God belongs and we're very happy to carry on with our lives so long as God stays in his proper place, thank you very much.

But when we realize God may have designs on other areas of our lives, areas we may not *want* to open to God...well, then we get a little anxious. We may even feel a little offended. But that's the thing about God: he's not interested in part of us, he's interested in all of us.

We hear the gospel as a promise and not as a threat when we realize God's interested in every part of us because he wants to *redeem* every part of us, to *transform* every part of us. The message Jesus told his disciples he had come to proclaim is a message about God's intention for

the whole human experience, not just one part of it.

It's a message of redemption for the head, for the heart, and for the body. It's for individuals and for communities. It's for Jews and Gentiles, for rich and poor, for men and women, for the sick and the healthy, for all people in all times and in all places. It's a big message, and we do ourselves no favors if we try and shrink it down to something we can pretend to manage. It is the work of God to which we are called, not our own work.

In order for us to live into that promise, we need to have a clear and compelling vision of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. That gospel is about more than making us nice people; it's even about more than satisfying whatever spiritual longings we may have. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about nothing less than the transformation, the transfiguration of the entire world. It's about the whole of the creation being caught up in the life and the power of God.

This helps explain something else we see in today's lesson from Mark. After Jesus had healed people, after he had taught people, after he had done all manner of amazing things in their midst, what happens? He goes out alone to pray, and pretty soon his disciples are looking for him. And when they find him, they say, "Everyone is searching for you." How does Jesus respond? "We're leaving."

Everyone in Capernaum wanted Jesus to stay, but Jesus knew there was even greater work to be done. His was a *missional* gospel. He could have stayed; he probably could have enjoyed tremendous success as a local healer and teacher, Capernaum's own resident celebrity prophet. But he knew his message had to go forth; it had to reach all of Israel, and from there become a message that would reach to the ends of the earth.

Being a member of the people of God means taking part in the mission of proclamation that was at the heart of the ministry of Jesus himself. This is another way of thinking about our observance of the season of Epiphany: Epiphany is about the "showing forth" of God in the world, the "showing forth" of the gospel to all people.

In this day and age, *we're* the ones in whom the gospel shows forth; we're the ones in whom and through whom the Word goes forth. We are called, not just to share with the world information about the kingdom, but to invite them to participate in the same on-going transformation that we ourselves experience as the people of God.

There is a world out there that is dying for some good news. There are people who are desperate for healing, people who are hungry for deliverance. And there are people whose lives are so far gone that they have given up the hope of ever hearing some good news.

How did Jesus respond to a world he knew was waiting to hear the gospel of God's salvation? "Let us go on, so that I proclaim the gospel [to all people], for that is what I came to do."

Let us follow our Lord's example; let us go to our neighbors so that we might proclaim the message to them as well, for that is what *we* have been sent to do. Let us go forth with a message of transformation, a message for the head and the heart and the body, for individuals

and for communities, for the faithful and the faithless, for rich and poor, for all people and all times and all places. Let us go throughout this region proclaiming the gospel in word and in power, for that is the way the good news about Jesus will make its way into our world, and the showing forth of the glory of God will be manifest, to the honor of his Name. Amen.

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