

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, Year B – January 28, 2024

“Building up the Kingdom of God”

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ST. THOMAS’ EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 • Psalm 111 • 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 • Mark 1:21-28

Our Truthseekers’ class for middle- and high-school students has been tackling big questions. Recently, a friend asked me a big question: are Episcopalians evangelical Christians? The word evangelical comes from the Greek, *euangelion*, meaning good message, good news. We are expected to share the Good News with the world. In this sense, yes, all Christians are evangelical.

The Gospel writers relay this good message in the telling of Jesus’ life story. In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus teaches in the temple on the Sabbath and all are amazed at his authority. Jesus exorcises a demon and again, all are amazed. At once, his fame begins to spread throughout the region. Imagine how fast his fame would have spread with the internet! In Jesus’ day, news spread slowly, leaving room for events to be embellished and distorted. If we think news sources are biased now, imagine what it must have been like back then--like a giant game of telephone!

A demon shows himself in the synagogue after Jesus teaches. The writers of Mark’s Gospel invite us into the room with them, where we may overhear their conversation and watch the outcome of Jesus’ encounter with the demon. The unclean spirit in the man knows why Jesus is there—his purpose is to destroy evil and to save souls. “Be silent,” Jesus says, the world isn’t ready for that message. This news is not for you to announce.

The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as “the Holy One of God” before anyone else in the synagogue does. They are waiting for the Messiah, the anointed one, the mighty king who will lead their armies and liberate them from invasion and occupation, but it could not be this son of a carpenter, could it? The demon sees Jesus’ identity, while the temple leaders have to adjust their expectations. What are our expectations for Jesus’ return? That’s a question for another sermon.

By silencing the demon, Jesus is asserting God’s authority over the demons, then he orders the unclean spirit to leave the man. Jesus may also be trying to manage the messaging, to avoid antagonizing the temple leaders who are slower to understand who Jesus is.

Later in Mark, Jesus asks his followers to be silent, too, though in a gentler way. By silencing them, he limits the speculation and the fascination of observers, allowing Jesus’ identity to be revealed by God and discovered in God’s own time. Attracting attention will interfere with Jesus’ ministry, draw the attention of those in power, and put him and those who are amazed by him at risk. I suspect many of us can relate to this concern; that sharing our identities openly may make us vulnerable to judgment and discrimination.

The silence and secrecy in Mark’s Gospel, the sense of mystery, continues in the parables. A few chapters later, in Mark 4:11, Jesus says to the twelve, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God,” The Greek word for secret is *mysterion*.

The mystery is heightened by Mark’s sense of urgency. Everything happens immediately in Mark. Jesus is baptized by John and immediately as he comes up

from the water, he sees the Spirit appear as a dove. Immediately, the Spirit drives Jesus into the desert. When Jesus calls his disciples into fishing boats, immediately, the men drop their nets and follow him. When Jesus sees James and John mending their nets, immediately Jesus calls to them. In today's reading, they go into Capernaum and immediately he started teaching. Immediately the man with the unclean spirit makes himself known, and so on.

This secrecy on the one hand and urgency on the other draw in the reader. Why does everything need to be secret? What is Jesus not telling us? It seems the secret will be revealed very soon.

Jesus reveals the Good News incrementally through his actions—his teachings on the law and scripture, the healings, exorcisms, and other miracles. These actions need to be interpreted like a parable needs to be interpreted. The meat of the message must be absorbed and digested, broken down into smaller particles of knowledge, before it strengthens the spirit. We have to work to understand the message and apply it to our lives before we may share it with others. The problem is that it is so easy for us to misunderstand and for our actions to reflect what we think is right, rather than what God teaches us is right.

After Paul founds the church in Corinth, he discovers that, these Christians are particularly gifted at erecting obstacles to their faith and that of other members of their community. Some of them try to introduce “new teachings” and do extraordinary things, like Jesus did, but when their actions do not reflect the Christian message, Paul hears about it. He tries his best to guide the church remotely.

In the second reading today, Paul teaches Corinthian Christians to be careful about their dining practices. This advice seems trivial and possibly legalistic, so a little context is helpful.

In Corinth, religious, civic, and social spheres overlap considerably. The only source of meat is from temple sacrifices to the Roman gods. Community members of many faiths would socialize together at dinners. Paul starts his letter, “All of us possess knowledge,” then he expounds on this knowledge: we all know that “No idol in the world really exists” and “There is no God but one.” This isn’t news. They already agree on this teaching, but do they fully understand it and do their actions reflect it?

Paul advises Christians to be careful, lest they mislead others. The Christian diners may believe in the one true God, but others who have a “weak conscience” may believe that worshipping the Roman gods is acceptable, too. Having a weak conscience doesn’t mean that they lack character or are evil or unethical. The Greek word for conscience translates literally to “seeing with,” so has a connotation of knowing or awareness. People with “weak consciences” do not fully know, are not fully aware, that is, they do not yet fully understand. Knowledge is not about information, but about transformation.

Paul writes, “Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak,” that is, to others who don’t know or aren’t aware. The Greek word for “liberty” is *exousia*, literally “power” or “authority.” Our New Revised Standard Version translation uses the word “right.” Paul’s use of this word suggests

that he sees some Christians using their power or authority or even their right to eat meat without reflecting on the consequences.

Paul does not tell them to lecture others about the one true God, nor to try to give them knowledge. Paul counsels these Christians to let their actions reflect their beliefs. At the heart of our faith is love. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Paul wants them to understand that the church will be stronger if they—the ones with knowledge—are careful to let their actions reflect their beliefs, which are grounded in love.

The key to community building is love. Jesus spreads the good news about our one, true, loving, and faithful God through his actions performed in love. He heals bodies and spirits. He does not seek after power or use his privilege, but serves the poor, the hungry, the weak. Paul advises these Corinthian Christians to do likewise.

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” If interpreted literally, some could use this verse to dismiss any form of intellectual enterprise, but this is not Paul’s meaning here. It’s not enough for our actions to reflect what we believe is right because often our understanding of the Christian message is weak. We are also not called to persuade others that we are right or to change the ways others think. If we act in love, the Good News will spread through our words and actions.

There are many ways to be evangelical, but for me, it boils down to this: when we dig deep into the mystery of our faith, we discover love and love is meant to be shared. I’d like to invite you to reflect on how your love will flow into the life of

the church this coming year, as we prepare for our Annual Meeting. We see evidence of love all around us. Come and help us build this beloved community.