

Let's Go!

Leviticus 13:1-3, 45-46; Mark 1:32-45 (ESV)

July 14, 2002

“Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” Jesus came for one reason. He came to preach the gospel. As soon as he preached it to one group of people, he moved on to preach it to others. That is why he came. That is why his followers have preached the gospel around the world and down through the centuries to us. Preaching was not all that Jesus did. He called disciples. He taught. He healed people. He cast out demons. Yet these were secondary to preaching the gospel.

The church has not always understood this priority. In fact, the confusion began with the core group of his first four disciples in today's reading. They started out well enough. Saturday night, after their Sabbath worship in the synagogue, Simon and Andrew and James and John “brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.” That is great. There is nothing better for disciples to do than to bring people to Jesus. We would do well to continue this today.

But listen to what happened next. Jesus got up early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, and went out on a prayer retreat. Simon and the rest of his old fishing buddies hunted him down, found him, and said, “What are you doing out here? Everyone back there is looking for you! Come on back.” Can you believe it? On the first Sunday morning of Jesus' ministry, less than a week after he had started preaching, his disciples were already saying, “Let's keep things the way they are! The crowds are good. The whole city came out. Everyone likes you. We know everyone's name here. The kingdom of God has come to Capernaum. So come on back! Keep on doing what you've been doing.”

We had better be glad the disciples lost this one. If they had won, we never would have heard about Jesus. He never would have left the “First and Only Christian Church of Capernaum.” So how did he respond to his disciples? Jesus said, “Let's go!” “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” That is why he came out of the town, and that is why he came to us at all. And so Jesus went throughout all Galilee, preaching the gospel to other people. And his disciples went with him.

They learned on the very first Sunday not to be content with the previous day's work. They learned on the very first Sunday not to rest easy with a church full

of people who had already heard the gospel and met Jesus. They learned to go on, to stretch, to reach, to work hard, to move beyond the comfortable, always to preach the gospel, always to seek the lost, always to bring more people to Jesus, always to build up the church. These are lessons of continuing importance to the church today.

Again, we have benefitted from what those first disciples learned then. Otherwise, we never would have heard the gospel preached this far away from Capernaum. Someone brought us to Jesus. Someone preached the gospel to us. Earlier disciples of Jesus made us disciples. The question now is, have we learned what those first disciples learned? It is our turn. Whom have we brought to Jesus? To whom have we preached the gospel? With whom have we shared the good news? Whom have we brought to church? Whom have we led into discipleship? How have we reached beyond the existing church, every day, to include other people and build up the church? These are not questions of personal style or preference. These are not optional parts of discipleship that we can take or leave at our pleasure. These are integral and necessary parts of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, who says, "Let's go!" "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

So what happened next? Jesus went out preaching. Then, horror of horrors, a leper came and asked him for help. Leprosy was a terrible disease. Jesus had healed people with a broad variety of diseases back in Capernaum. But leprosy? People then thought that healing a leper was as good as raising someone from the dead. The disciples were standing back, holding their noses, and thinking to themselves, "We told you so! You should have stuck with what we had! There weren't any lepers back in Capernaum. We didn't let them in." And, you know, they did not let the lepers into town. That was the law. The lepers had to stay outside of town. The people then regarded lepers as contagious, ritually unclean, and obviously under the severe judgment of God for some terrible sin. The lepers were removed from the community and were as good as dead. If Jesus had not been out there in the countryside, going from one town to another, looking for someone else to whom to preach the gospel, this would not have happened.

So this was a moment of truth. Would Jesus admit that the disciples had been right about restricting his ministry to a better clientele? No, of course not! Instead, he showed them what his gospel was all about. Jesus, who had already cast out demons with the sheer power of his words, chose to heal the stinking, unclean, cursed and condemned leper by touching him. He touched him! We may not realize the significance of this. Jesus touched the untouchable. He broke the Old Testament law. He violated religion, law, faith, common sense, societal customs and standards, and everything the people held dear. This was not a long distance healing. This was not only a demonstration of the power of the word. This was up close and personal.

Beyond the disciples' wildest fears, he touched the man. With that touch, Jesus healed the incurable. He cleansed the unclean. He as good as raised a dead man, and so broke not only the power of disease but also the power of death. With that touch, Jesus touched someone who had not been touched for years. He not only brought the man healing, he not only brought the man new life, but also he brought the man who had been excluded from human community for years back into human contact and community.

And—this is subtle, but very important—with that touch, Jesus took the man's curse upon himself. He blessed the leper by taking away his curse. He made the leper clean by taking on his uncleanness. Why do you think that Jesus could not go into the towns anymore, but had to stay out in the country? He was ritually unclean! He took the curse upon himself! By law, he could not enter the towns. This is what is so stunning. The disciples were struck silent. And yet, it says that people came out to Jesus from everywhere.

In this one act of healing, this early, defining moment, we find a summary of the whole gospel that Jesus preached! In the Christmas stories, which Mark does not include, Jesus takes on human flesh and comes to live with us as one of us. In the crucifixion stories, Jesus takes on not only human flesh but also the very wretchedness of our human condition. He takes on the curse of human sin to forgive our sin. And Mark is one long crucifixion story.

Mark preaches to us the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who gave his life so we might live. And we see that already, right here in the first chapter. Jesus seeks us out and takes on our sin, our uncleanness, our stinking and shameful cursedness, in order to make us pure and clean and whole and to present us to God. He restores us to right relationship with God and so to right relationship with each other. That is what his gospel is all about. The kingdom of God is coming in with Jesus. The kingdom of sin, disease, decay, death, and evil is on the way out. Thanks be to God!

Much to the astonishment of the disciples, Jesus was serious about preaching the gospel to everyone, even lepers. He expected his disciples to do the same. He continues to expect us to do the same today. I am not saying that we are required to perform miraculous healings. But even Jesus was concerned that his healing of the leper not become a spectacle that prevented people from hearing and paying attention to the gospel. And we can preach the gospel. We can tell the story of Jesus. We can reach out to touch people otherwise excluded from human community. We can bring people to church.

How does this ancient gospel apply to our life together as the church today? First, there are many opportunities for hands on Christian service, for a healing touch in the name of Jesus Christ. There are people who need blood that we can

give. There are people who need healing that we can support. There are people who need food that we can provide. There are people who need homes that we can build. There are people who need the gospel we can preach. There are people who need the love we can share. There are children who need to be taught. There are hospitals that need to be built. The list goes on and on. These are proper ways of touching and healing the wounds of our brothers and sisters. By the way, our own Grace Kim's father is a Presbyterian minister who has spent the greatest part of his ministry pastoring lepers in Korea, so even this very basic kind of ministry still goes on today. And now she is going to seminary, so that she, too, may preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, another way we can apply the gospel to our lives is as good stewards of the many gifts God has given us, including especially our financial resources. This can extend our ministry around the world. Presbyterian churches generally do not have financial problems. We sometimes have giving problems. But generally we do not have financial problems, because we Presbyterian churches have, within our membership, more than enough financial resources to carry out the mission of the church. Sometimes, we do not realize that. Sometimes we do not see or understand the need and so do not see the opportunity. But typically we Presbyterians do give according to our understanding of the need. When there is a demonstrated need, we have risen to the occasion.

So we will be trying to communicate a better understanding of what the needs of the church are, here at Grace Covenant, across the nation, and around the world, so that our giving can increase dramatically. There are two people who suffer when we fail to give generously. The person who does not receive the ministry suffers, obviously. But also, the person who does not give the gift suffers, for that person is deprived of the joy of being a cheerful giver. So in addition to our hands on involvement in the mission of the church, another way we can respond to today's gospel is by being good stewards and generous givers, supporting the larger mission of the church beyond what we can do individually.

A third application of today's reading, and perhaps the primary one, is for us to be good evangelists and to build up the church of Jesus Christ. Remember again that someone brought us to Jesus. Someone preached the gospel to us. Earlier disciples of Jesus made us disciples. Now it is our turn. Whom have we brought to Jesus? To whom have we preached the gospel? With whom have we shared the good news? Whom have we brought to church? Whom have we led into discipleship? How have we reached beyond the existing church, every day, to include other people and to build up the church? Think of it this way: the reason Jesus came was to preach the gospel. The church belongs to him; it is not ours. Therefore, since his purpose is to preach the gospel, it is also the purpose of his

church to preach the gospel of his self-giving love to those who have not yet heard it.

One of the results of today's reading from the Gospel according to Mark is that we, as the church of Jesus Christ, can never be content to minister only to those who are already members. We are always to be reaching out, touching, healing, including, and ministering to others. It is our turn now to bring to Jesus, and so to bring to his church, the lonely, the newcomer, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the proud and the humble, the newlyweds and the bereaved, those who suffer, those who pretend not to suffer, children, young adults, middle aged adults, and older adults, all God's children, all the people who need to be here as much as we need to be here. To do this is to be the church of Jesus Christ.

For several summers in the 1990s, it was my privilege to attend the Montreat Youth Conference, with twelve-hundred teen-agers from all over the country. In addition to all the fine preaching we heard, and the Bible studies, and the small group work, we did a lot of singing in Anderson Auditorium. We sang some good hymns and we sang some silly camp songs. The all time, foot stomping, roof raising favorite every year was a song that made fun of an old television show called "Star Trek," with a different stanza about each character and hand motions to go with it. There was one line that has stuck with me: "Star Trekking, across the universe, always going forward, 'cause we cannot find reverse!"

What a motto that would make for the church: "Always going forward, 'cause we cannot find reverse!" To focus upon the past would be to perish. Even to try to hang on to the present would be to stagnate. Only by going forward can we rightly worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who says to us even now, "Let's go!" "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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