

Epiphany 5B: Mark 1:29-39
Church of the Good Shepherd
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On *Not* Meeting People's Needs

I saw an advertisement for a church a while ago that caught my attention. The ad opened with a picture of church with the voice-over saying: "Imagine a church where every member is passionately, wholeheartedly, recklessly...calling the shots. A church that exists to serve *you* and *your* needs. Too tired to make it to church on time Sunday morning? At this church, the church service starts when *you* get there. Tired of dirty looks when your child acts up in church? Not to worry. If your baby's screaming, *you* stay seated. The others around you can leave. So you don't give a lot to the church financially, but you're curious who does? Alright, if you join, you'll know what every person gives in detail. Want a church that shows you they really care? At this church, your car will not only get a buff and a wax while you're in the church service, but a tune up and oil change as well. Still not sold, not sure it's worth it? Well, how do tickets to the Super Bowl sound? Other churches can't promise you tickets to the big game, but this church can. Because, this is meChurch, where it's all about *you!*"

Ok, this isn't a real church. The ad was a joke, one that pokes fun at some of the excesses of "seeker-friendly" churches and their focus on meeting people's "needs." But if we are honest, it's not too far off from the way many Christians think of the church, even in old-line denominations like our own. Blame it on the culture. In a world where we have a plethora of consumer choices for everything from cars to dish soap, it's not surprising that we apply the same logic to church. And so people "church shop," looking for a church that suits them, that "meets their needs," whether that means having a nursery and ample parking or supporting the causes and political values they hold.

Now, I don't think there's anything wrong with visiting different churches to get to know them and see what their teachings, priorities, and worship styles are. But this getting to know churches in the current environment has led to seeing church as simply a purveyor of religious goods and services designed to attract and satisfy more people. In this view, the church is not much different than Kroger. The supermarket doesn't tell you that you should prefer Romaine lettuce over Iceberg. Rather, they look at which products you want and offer you those products cheaply and efficiently. In the same way, church is expected to offer programs and worship that that appeal to the religious consumer.

Now, of course, we in the church, we want to meet needs and attract more people. What good would we be if we didn't? But that begs the question: *Which needs* should the church attempt to meet, and which should we not attempt to meet? And *who* determines that? Say, for instance, someone says that they want a church where the sermons are comforting and uplifting every week? Seems understandable. Except that this can mean they never hear any sermons that challenge them. Or take the phone calls that churches receive from people looking for assistance. Some are from people who've hit a rough spot, and just need a leg up. But I remember one woman when I was in Madison who was calling on behalf of her granddaughter because her mobile home had leaky windows. I don't know why she thought to call my church. I guess she figured that's what churches are for—to "help" with whatever needs helping, including window repair!

Jesus faced similar expectations among those he ministered. Jesus begins his ministry in the town of Capernaum where he goes to proclaim the news that God's Kingdom, God's rule is at hand. But almost as soon as he gets there, he is confronted with dozens of people who are suffering from emotional, psychological, and physical problems who come and dump their troubles on him—people possessed by demons, people racked with illnesses, suffering from every ailment imaginable. Mark tells us that by the evening, "They brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door." The whole city! And Jesus has compassion on them, and heals them and casts out their demons. But then just as Jesus' ministry seemed to be taking off, he walks away from it all. He leaves. He skips town, leaving behind a whole crowd of people who sought his help, his touch. You can imagine how the townspeople reacted: I brought my dying mother here. How can you pass her by? I've been suffering for years. Why won't you heal me like you did the others? After all, isn't it the job of a messiah to help people? Isn't the messiah supposed to meet the needs of the world?

To the residents of Capernaum, Jesus was a miracle-worker, an exorcist and healer. Someone who would help them, who would meet their needs. And that's why Jesus left Capernaum, why he *had* to leave. Jesus knew that the residents' greatest need was not healing their diseases or liberation from demons. He knew—he'd been reminded in his time of prayer—that his mission was larger than that, and he couldn't allow himself to be constrained by their expectations. He 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." Jesus had to be clear about who he was and what he was about, because there were so many opportunities to "do good," to "help," pulling at him. Jesus could not be distracted from what he knew was his call. For, he came not just to cure disease and heal the sick. He came to deal one-on-one with the root of all the unhealthiness in the whole world.

Jesus' refusal to let the expectations of others define him and his mission is important for us to remember when we think about the church meeting our needs. We each may come to church for a variety of reasons—help with our problems, refuge from the pressures of life, confirmation of what we believe, fellowship with people like us, values we want to instill in our children, as well as intimacy with God. But many of us can testify that—thank God!—church often turns out to be more interesting than our expectations. In worship, in the life of the church, God takes our motivations and reforms them. He redirects our desires, and gives us more than we would have known how to ask for. In hearing God's word preached, our preconceptions get challenged and changed. What I thought was my biggest problem is revealed to be not so important, and I discover problems I would have never known I had before I met Jesus.

The church then is not only about *meeting our needs* but also about *rearranging our needs*. This is true with regard to the larger world too. I mean, we are daily bombarded by headline after headline of disaster, woe and injustice, and so we may be led to think the greatest need facing the world today is poverty, or drug abuse, or the breakdown of the family, or lab-engineered viruses, or racial prejudice or peace in the Middle East. These are not *unimportant* issues. They grab the heart of God. God's compassion has always been focused on the poor and oppressed. And Christians *should* both be moved by the suffering of others and work together to relieve that suffering. And as I shared in my Annual Report, we should be doing more as a congregation, serving and blessing our neighbors.

At the same time, though, we have to admit that no matter how much relief we provide, no matter how much good we do, as a church or as a country, there is still greater good to be done, still a greater need to be met. The poor will always be with you, Jesus says. There will always be those in need. This doesn't mean we should not be involved, but it does mean we should be clear about our mission. As Jesus' response to Simon tells us, the most profound problem we face is not the threat of nuclear war or global warming. It is rather our alienation from God.

For, out of our alienation from God come all kinds of problems, dysfunctions and injustices—murder, lust, greed, loneliness, pride, oppression, deception and a whole host of other evils that plague humankind. The biblical picture is clear: The breakdown of society is rooted in the breakdown of our relationship with our Creator. And the biblical response is equally clear: The way out of social chaos begins with people being restored to our heavenly Father.

Sure, coming to believe in Jesus, that he has reconciled us with God, won't solve all our problems, not instantly, not immediately. But our personal transformation goes hand in hand with transforming our relationships, which goes hand in hand with transforming our communities, transforming cities and whole nations.

You know, in the West, since the American and French revolutions, there has been a debate between two groups who hold to two different visions—those who argue for gradual reform and those who feel the only way forward is to tear up the past, that is, revolution. The Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich was once asked what he thought about this, what he thought was the most effective way to change society—was it through violent revolution or gradual reform? He thought for a moment, then gave a careful answer: “Neither.” Rather he suggested that “If you wanted to change society, you must tell an alternative story.” That is what Jesus did, what the church does, if it does anything at all. We tell a different story, in our worship and in our lives, and through that story we are transformed. And we do this because we know it is through the transformation of people, not political activity or activism, that the world is transformed.

This is not because our political causes are right or wrong but because the problems facing the world are fundamentally spiritual, not political or social or economic: namely, that billions of men and women do not know the love and grace of their Creator. Some live in ignorance and even fear of the spiritual world. Others are taught they must earn their way into God's good graces. They live unaware of life's richest possibilities—that they can know a loving God, and that his power can change their lives. God calms fears, forgives guilt, and instills an unearthly joy. He establishes the lonely in the family of faith and gives life to the dying—*life of startling and enduring dimensions*. Not to be trite, but Jesus *is* the solution to our problems, the answer to the world's greatest need.

This is a message, I confess, that I need to hear. As someone who has studied politics (alongside religion) all my life, and who works hard to keep up with and understand developments in the news, I can become at times angry and other times despondent at the direction our country is going, not just our laws and policies, but also the state of our national dialog. In the paper each day, I find further reason to be troubled and concerned about the future of our country, of the mess we are leaving for our children. And while I think I have good reason for being concerned about the economy, our freedoms, our electoral processes, the mental health of our children, our national security, to say nothing of the state of the church in our country—as important as these concerns are, and as anxious as I may be to

see that they are addressed with wisdom, humility and courage, Jesus today reminds me that none of these are not the real problem. They are rather symptoms, symptoms of a deeper, spiritual trouble.

Which is one of the reasons, I suspect, God saw fit to put me in the pulpit rather than let me become a pundit. For here I address what really wrong with the world, not just the symptoms to give witness to the Gospel, to name what's really wrong with the world, and to share and celebrate with you how God has met our deepest need by sending his Son to us. We are to give witness to this in all that we are—in the way we live our lives, in the things we say, and in the ministries that we undertake as followers of Christ.

The guiding question of meChurch is, Are we meeting needs? The central question that concerns *us* is instead, Are we proclaiming, by words and deeds, the coming of the Kingdom? In Jesus, we are called out of ourselves and into the service of others, called to meet the world's deep need with our deepest joy. And we shouldn't be surprised to find in the process that Jesus doesn't just meet the needs we bring to him, but also needs we didn't even know he had, needs that only he can answer. Thanks be to God!