

Epiphany 3B: Mark 1:14-20  
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January 24, 2021  
Church of the Good Shepherd

One of my colleagues, who is a big baseball fan, says that his hero is in fact not a professional player but rather a fan who unexpectedly entered a baseball game. It was twenty years ago, in 2003, game six of the National League Championship Series. The Chicago Cubs were one inning away from breaking the curse of missing the World Series for the 57th consecutive season. That is, until Steve Bartman came into play. Steve Bartman was then a 26-year-old Cubs fan who knew the game inside and out, and coached a youth baseball team. His greatest dream was for the Cubs to play the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. But Bartman was raised in a “karaoke culture,” my friend observes, referring to the device that allows you to sing along with recorded song. And having grown up in that culture, where you get to join in the action, the hardest thing for him to do was to just sit there. This became an issue when the Marlins batter slammed the ball to where Bartman was seated in left field. He couldn’t just sit still and watch the batter hit a home run. He had to catch the ball and put the batter out. Except that, when he lunged for the ball, he interfered with left fielder Moises Alou, and in the tussle with Bartman Alou dropped the ball. Alou threw a hissy fit. Then the city of Chicago threw a hissy fit. A police guard had to be posted outside Bartman’s home in the Chicago suburbs. Media helicopters hovered over his home, hoping to catch an image of the guy who “cost the Cubs the World Series.” It got so bad that Bartman contemplated taking the advice of some columnists and moving to Miami. Now, what the Cubs manager Dusty Baker should have done was to bring Bartman with him into the dugout during the next game to celebrate the Cubs’ “number one fan.” But rather than celebrating him as a model for true love of sports, he was demonized for wanting to be part of the game, to share with his heroes in the action.

As I shared last week, one of the amazing things about God is that he not only allows us to be part of the game, but invites us into it. We humans have a part to play in God’s work of salvation. We see this in our Gospel lesson this morning from Mark. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, two sets of brothers, all fishermen, to follow him, to be his disciples, to join him in his ministry as apprentices, understudies.

What strikes me about Jesus’ call to these four is how specific it was, how he spoke directly to them, to their lives. Jesus doesn’t simply say, “Be my apprentices,” he invites them to “fish for people,” or as older translations have it, to be “fishers of men.” He was speaking to what they knew, what their experience, what their gifts were—catching fish.

Jesus makes the same call on each of us, on our lives. (I made this point last Sunday, when we looked at the calling of Nathanel and Philip) Jesus calls us, invites us to follow him and share in what he is doing, using the gifts and passions we have been given, that we already have. And this is true for us as individuals and as a congregation.

Last week, I posed a question to you all, asked you to think about what our calling is here at Good Shepherd, what our vocation is as a parish. Because we can’t be all things to all people. No

congregation by itself can embody the fullness of the Church, no one parish can exhibit all the graces of Christ's Body.

Even the Roman Catholic Church, which asserts that it is *the Church*, recognizes this truth, that no one congregation has it all. To be sure, the local church is fully "church," the church manifest in one location, but different congregations and religious orders have gifts they each particularly embody, that they contribute to the wider, worldwide Church. They call these gifts 'charisms' and recognize that groups like the Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits bring their own flavor, their own emphases, the own contributions—Benedictines, for example, witness to the balanced life of prayer, work and study; the Franciscans are committed to simplicity and serving the poor, and Dominicans are known for their focus on preaching.

A similar appreciation can be seen in the Church of the Savior, an ecumenically Protestant church in Washington, DC. This church is actually not a single institution but is a fellowship of several smaller house churches—eight churches currently. Each of these churches has its own focus of ministry that the members work towards together—education, service to the poor, ministry to children, food ministry, etc.

So, to return to the question I posed to you last week—what is our gifting, our charism, what ministry do we contribute to Jesus' mission? I hope that you have had some time to ponder that question. I will tell you that I've reflected on it a lot lately. And I'd like to share with you what I have come up.

After being with you, now going on four years, and reflecting on our hundred-year history, on where the energy of our parishioners is, what gifts and resources we have, and even what your priest is good at—it seems to me that where we are gifted, we bring to God's mission is the ministry of education, teaching and learning.

Consider these factors:

**OUR MISSION.** Our mission statement, carved into the lintel above the door on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, is what? "To know Christ and make him known." That is, we are called to learn Christ and his ways and to teach them to others.

**GOOD SHEPHERD SCHOOL.** Fifty years ago, our predecessors here at Good Shepherd (and some of you here this morning) decided to open a school on the church property, to provide education for the children of the parish and of the surrounding neighborhood.

**YOUR PRIESTS.** My immediate predecessor Ross Wright—the Reverend *Dr.* Ross Wright—was...is a teacher, a college professor. And while I didn't go as far in my education, just the two masters, teaching and Christian formation have been long been a passion and gifting for me. And I have eagerly employed that gift in my career—in my first call, as the Associate for Adult Education, I didn't preach much, but I created and taught a lot of classes, four a week at one point. I take real joy in bringing together knowledge, insight, and wisdom from scholars and pastors that have gone before me. My aim has been to be the scribe that Jesus commends in the Gospel of Matthew: "The scribe who is trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of

the house who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.” That is, bringing the wisdom of the past to bear on the concerns of today. But it’s not just your priests who have this bent. Many of you are educators—school teachers, college and seminary professors, and librarians (which is “teacher adjacent”). Education is part of our character, the DNA of Good Shepherd.

But what cemented this fact for me, what really made this identity manifest to me, was the insert I included in the Christmas Eve bulletin (which I included in this morning’s bulletin). In it, I noted all the Christian formation opportunities we regularly offer—bible studies for men, for women, and for families, sermon discussions after worship, the rector’s monthly forum, children’s Sunday school—things we do to help each other to “know Christ and make him known.”

Now, naming and claiming education as our charism, our gifting, doesn’t mean that education is the only thing we do. But what it does do is it clarifies where we should put our focus, our energies. And it challenges us to build on our strengths, to commit ourselves to improving our effectiveness and our reach our education ministry. What this means going forward, I believe, is four things:

1. Continuing to Offer a Wide Variety of Formation Opportunities—Continuing the Bible studies, forums, art devotions, sermon discussions and the like. To these, I plan to add two more-intensive classes that will allow us time to dig into topics that challenge us today. The first class, which I’ll be teaching in Lent, is an introduction to Benedictine spirituality. St Benedict of Nursia was a 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian who founded the first monastery and who composed the first ‘rule’ or order of living for the monks there. The Rule was written to guide their common life and encourage the monks’ spiritual growth through worship, study and work. Benedictine spirituality may seem esoteric, and likely irrelevant, but my aim will be to show how the wisdom of Benedict’s rule can guide and deepen our own spiritual growth—without becoming a monk!

The other course will likely strike you as more immediately relevant. The topic will be on Christianity and politics. In case you haven’t heard, we have a presidential election this year, and the months leading up to it is sure to be one of the most contentious—and ugly—campaign seasons in living memory. But whereas the rest of the country will likely be screaming at each other and calling each other names, this class aims at helping us to talk about contentious issues, ethical values and our political witness with charity, honesty and humility—that is, as Christians. Of particular concern will be examining the opportunities, responsibilities and dangers posed to us as Christians by our governing system and the current political climate. I expect to offer this course in the early fall—just in time for the election!

2. Strengthening our Ministry to Children—We have been blessed with Jamie Bergman, Elaine Simmons and other teachers in our church, who have lovingly and faithfully labored to share the faith with our youngest members. But now, thanks to your generosity, we feel it is time to “kick it up a notch,” as Emeril Laggase used to say, time to augment the work of our volunteers with a designated Children’s Minister. This

position we envision will be a paid part-time position, and the person we select will work with Jamie Bergman and our other teachers to improve our Sunday school program and develop other programs for children.

3. Strengthening our Partnership with Good Shepherd School. Our church started the school in the 1970s as an education and outreach ministry of the church, using the facilities of the church for classrooms and offices. The children of our church attended as students and several members have been teachers and volunteers at the school. In the decades since its founding, though, as the health of the school waxed and waned, relations between the school and church deteriorated, as the school sought to be more independent of the church. Where the school was once *a ministry of the church*, and its budget a part of the *church's* budget, a decade or so ago, the school incorporated as a separate entity. And where originally a full half of the board was composed of vestry members, including the rector, now we only have one representative on the board. Where the rector served as the chaplain for the school, today the school has its own chaplain, who is of a different denomination. And where the school used to advertise itself as a “Christian” school, the school has become a decidedly secular institution.

The church has observed the growing alienation with dismay. This past year, the tensions came to a head, when the vestry notified the school that we were ending our usage agreement. After some months of discussion and negotiation, the vestry agreed in November to rescind our notice of termination and the school agreed to work to improve relations with our church. To that end, the board chair is now meeting monthly with our senior warden, I have returned to chapel (as an observer), and I have been invited to the next school board meeting to present on what it means to be Episcopalian and what it means to be an Episcopal school. Importantly, the school board has since reaffirmed GSES's identity as a “Christian” and “Episcopal” school, and we look forward to working with the leadership of the school to make that a reality.

In my presentation to the board, I plan to bring up three priorities I think will be essential to recovering their identity as a Christian school:

- a. Classes in the Bible and Christian theology—We have no aim to dictate curricula, but I don't think that it's crazy to assume that a school that calls itself “Christian” would include instruction in the Christian religion, in what we believe and why.
- b. Weekly chapel services— not every other week, as currently, but weekly Christian worship, led by the rector and other clergy, where students are exposed to Christian hymnody, the Episcopal liturgy (*Book of Common Prayer*), the church calendar, and they hear talks on Jesus and Christian teaching should be the norm at GSES. Every Episcopal school I know expects students to attend weekly chapel.
- c. Membership in the National Association of Episcopal Schools—Good Shepherd School used to be a member but the last head of school let that affiliation drop. Thankfully, the school renewed its membership last month.

We were gratified that the school board reaffirmed the school's identity as a "Christian" and "Episcopal" school. This is the only way, I believe, we can live together: as partners in ministry. That is how the school was started and we want to remain partners with the school, to support the school as it provides not only education but also education in the teachings of the Church.

4. Training New Teachers—In an effort to share more widely the ministry of teaching in our congregation, I plan to offer training in leading small groups this spring. The aim of this training is to provide skills and techniques for leading thoughtful group conversations. These skills will enable new leaders to offer classes on a variety of subjects using published materials to provide the content of the class. This way we can multiply the formation opportunities we offer as a church.

So...

- Continuing to offer a variety of education offerings,
- Hiring a Childrens Minister
- Improving relations with Good Shepherd School
- Training New Teachers

Now, as we look to enhance our teaching ministry, that doesn't mean that education is all that we do, as I said. While education has emerged as a strength of our parish, another area that warrants greater attention is outreach. While there are some in our congregation who have faithfully kept up efforts to serve the community in the past few years—I'm thinking of the women of St. Monica's Guild—it is clear to me though that we can do a lot more. To address this shortcoming, I am calling for an "outreach summit," a gathering of parish leaders who are most passionate about outreach and have been involved in outreach efforts in the past. The purpose of this summit will be to discern where we as a congregation can most powerfully "bless our neighbors." This "summit" will be held in the coming weeks, I hope. And I am excited to see what comes of it.

As I suggested last week, Good Shepherd is not the same church it was thirty, fifteen, even three years ago. Nor is the community around our church the same as it was before. The danger of older congregations like ours is to focus on the past, to believe that our best days are behind us. Our best days may yet be ahead of us. Yet by looking backward we may miss what God has in store for us. By God's grace, and your shared commitment and giving, we can, I am convinced, make our future even better than our past. Like Simon and Andrew, James and John who dropped their nets to follow Jesus, we are called to let go of our past successes in order to follow him. I am convinced that if we do, we will discover in the process even more energy and miraculous deeds in store for us. Thanks be to God!