

You know, it's been fun to be able to attend the Wednesday night Bible Study. I've enjoyed myself, and I find that I ponder some of the things that are said or the questions that are asked for days afterwards. And naturally, sometimes those conversations form background for my comments from the pulpit.

But I need to tell you that the biggest part of the enjoyment on Wednesday nights is that I don't have to prepare material. Martha does that. And it's not what you'd call an easy crowd on Wednesday nights; I'd say, leading them is more like herding cats. But Martha does a great job. So my task there, as I've described it is simply to enjoy. Enjoy the company – Enjoy the laughter and the different perspectives – enjoy looking at Mark without any expectations of what I might find or hear. What a delight! I just wanted to let you know that could be **your** job, too, if you wanted. We meet for worship at 6:30 and for Bible study at 7:00 for an hour. Come for one or both.

Anyway..

Today, at the end of this healing story, It appears that Jesus is getting ready to be mobbed by people who have heard about him and what he can do. Earlier in chapter one we read that Jesus fame had begun to increase.

Jesus has only just begun his ministry, only just begun selecting his apostles, only just been baptized by John in the Jordan - and already his fame has begun to spread. Gospel lessons for the past several Sundays tell stories of miraculous healings. Jesus has been casting out demons, healing the sick, and-perhaps most astonishing of all to his hearers (*since they knew where he was brought up*) he was teaching with authority. Now, today, he adds to this list by cleansing a leper. It's little wonder that his fame spread

It seems that Jesus has a sort of healing, transforming gift: everyone he touches is changed. So we are not surprised, in verse 45, when Mark tells us that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly. Crowds of people were now seeking him out to beg for his life-giving touch, for more signs and wonders. Unfortunately, that's as far as many of them got in understanding who Jesus was and why he had come. Even his disciples failed sometimes to understand. But there's much more to Jesus' mission than his ability to fix physical and emotional problems, and that's what we need to look for. Of course, we have the advantage of knowing the whole story, but understanding who Jesus is and why he came is the key to understanding the message of Mark's Gospel.

To do that, we need to remember the whole story as we read this short passage set out for us today. One of the difficulties in selecting short sections of the Gospel for each Sunday is that we never hear this particular Gospel as Mark's hearers probably heard it: all in one piece. Most likely, this short Gospel would have been read from beginning to end to an attentive audience. It doesn't take that long... And in the same sitting, they would hear the miracle stories, but they would also hear, in the next chapters, Jesus talking about the kingdom of God and how they were expected to live. In spite of the crowd's excitement, they would hear that the religious authorities were beginning to plot ways to get rid of him. They wouldn't be able to dwell long on the miracles, because they would hear Jesus begin to talk about his coming

passion and death.

It's a powerful story when it's read in one sitting, but if you do that, you'll hear over and over the bottom line of Jesus' mission. That bottom line is that the kingdom of God is right here, right now. Jesus' mission is to show us who this God is and what God is like and how we're to live if we want to be a part of his kingdom. The miracles were not ends in themselves, nor were they acts that only Jesus did. Remember the Old Testament story this morning. Elisha the prophet cures Naaman of his leprosy. Like the prophet, Jesus gives the leper a task, "Go show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded." Jesus wasn't using the healing to point to himself. He used the formula that would have been recognized by his followers. No, Jesus used his miracles to get the people's attention so they could then hear his teaching; hear that he was calling them to live again the life of Torah, the life of the commandments God had given the people long before.

This is what the Gospel calls us to do. We are commissioned by our baptism to continue spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have the whole story. We know that living the gospel life isn't always easy, that we may be misunderstood. We know that life itself isn't always easy. We may suffer, but we have Jesus' example to keep us going. We all have gifts that we can use the way Jesus used miracles. Some of us may be healers. Others have gifts of listening or kindness or patience. Some, like Kitty have the gift of boundless energy. Each one of us has something that draws others to us and through that gift we offer others the grace and love of God. Like Jesus, we can show others who God is and what God is like. Like Jesus, we can be the catalyst that continues to spread the message Jesus taught.

But let's not forget the leper. He, too, has something to teach us. Leprosy effectively made him an outcast, made it impossible for him to be a part of society. By healing him, Jesus made it possible for him to rejoin the community. That, too, is an image of the kingdom of God. It's not just a nice coincidence that the Gospels are full of references to being part of a community. It's within the community that we are nourished by both word and sacrament. It's within the community that we are supported and commissioned to continue the work Jesus gave us.

I get asked a lot, How can I develop a closer relationship with God? How can I grow spiritually and feel like my life has more purpose? And my answer is always the same: It's not an "I" thing; it's a "we" thing. The kingdom of God is right here, right now and found in the community. Want all those things to happen? Draw closer to the community. Commit yourself to working and praying and giving with others, to make the world a better place. Join in laughter and fellowship and song and fun with those who have found meaning and purpose in a life lived together in Christ.

And your heart will be full and all will be well.

In Jesus name,

Amen.