

“Believers”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 5, 2012

Old Testament Lesson- Psalm 147:1-11, 20

New Testament Lesson-Mark 1:29-39

One winter day, a little boy in Alabama was standing on a grate next to a bakery trying to keep his feet warm; he had no shoes. A woman passing by saw the child and her heart ached. He had on only a light-weight jacket and the air was chilly. “Where are your shoes, young man?” she asked. The boy reluctantly admitted he simply didn’t have any. “Why don’t you come with me and we’ll see what we can do about that?” the woman said. Taking his hand, she led him into a nearby department store and bought him a new pair of shoes and a warm jacket. When they came back out onto the street, the little boy was so excited that he immediately started to run off to show his family the gifts. Suddenly he halted, turned around and ran back to the woman. He thanked her and then hesitated, “Ma’am, could I ask you a question? Ma’am, are you God’s wife?” The woman smiled and said, “Oh no, I’m not God’s wife, just one of God’s children.” The little boy grinned and nodded enthusiastically as he exclaimed, “I knew it! I just knew you were related!” How would the people in your life know that you are related to God? Have you ever told them? I mean really shared with another human being – a son, a daughter, grandchild, coworker, acquaintance, best friend, parent, brother or sister – shared with another human being about what lights you up inside when it comes to being in a relationship with God. How else do we expect to make a difference in life if we don’t take the time, muster the courage, find the inspiration to share in such a way that the other person comes away “just knowing that *you* are related” to God.

At the end of our sermon time last week, I said we’d take this Sunday and next to look for ways to break down barriers to faith in God, ways to help people to be more receptive to Christ in their lives, and ways to encourage and inspire people to grow in their faith – us included. So, that’s what we’re going to do. We’ll start this week by looking at what Jesus did to show people he had a relationship with God.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus is very clear about what he came to do as someone with a special relationship to God. It’s a signal for us to be just as clear with ourselves and with others when it comes to our relationship with God.

Here’s how it unfolds for Jesus; in three acts, three scenes: First, Jesus hears that “... Simon’s mother-in-law (is) in bed with a fever He comes and takes her by the hand and lifts her up, (helps her out of bed). ... The fever leaves her, and she begins to serve them.”

In the second scene, evening comes and “they bring to him all who are sick or possessed with demons ... And (Jesus) cures many who are sick with various diseases....” Then in the final scene, it’s morning and Jesus “gets up and goes out to a deserted place, and there he prays.” Simon and some others find him and say, “Everyone is searching for you.”

Turns out *Jesus has something they want* – a miraculous power to heal disease and overcome demons, or what we might think of as dark forces or misguided ways. Jesus has just spent the morning praying about this. He looks back on his night of curing diseases and overcoming evil in the world, prays to God, and this is what he says when he hears that “everyone is searching” for him: “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.” It’s as if the healings and battles with misguided forces are secondary, just things that happen as he goes about sharing with others his incredible relationship with God, and assuring them that they can have such a relationship, too. And some people get it, and some people don’t. What’s a person to do when Jesus comes near, speaks to the heart, and transforms a life – quiets our diseases and turns us from our misguided ways?

If we backup a bit in Mark’s gospel account, to verses 15, we see that the first words of Jesus in his public ministry are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” In other words, turn from your misguided ways and put your faith in God, and count this as the best news you have to tell about.

Jesus has already shown us the way; the next move is ours. Breaking down barriers to faith in God, helping people to be more receptive to Christ, inspiring people to grow in faith, this all has more to do with our relationship with God than it does with the other person? If you have someone in your life who has a sense that there is something greater than ourselves out there somewhere, someone who is spiritual but not religious, someone who accepts Jesus as a wise prophet and teacher but does not believe God incarnate, if you have someone in your life like that – or if you yourself relate to any of this – then the place to start is with you yourself.

Jesus has come near. For many of us, healing has occurred and transformation has begun, and some people around us have come to know and believe, and some have not. The only way that you or I will ever make a positive difference in the life of someone else, the life of that certain person God has put in your life-my life, the only way we make a difference is if we share our story, *let God speak through us*.

Barry Bailey of Fort Worth, Texas, tells of a man selling his farm. He hired an advertising company to write some copy describing the assets of the property. When the farmer heard the statement read, he said, “I’d like to hear it again.” So, the advertising executive read the statement once more.

Whereupon the farmer said: “Forget it. I’m not going to sell.” When the man asked why, the farmer replied: “I’ve always wanted to own a place like that.”

If people don’t hear your faith story and say, “I’ve always wanted something like that,” why would they listen to our invitations to come to church, our wish that they would join us in serving the community, our suggestion that Jesus could make a difference in their lives? Why would any of this matter to anyone else unless it first matters enough to you – to me –for us to actually get real about our faith with another human being? Forget about church, and tell them about your life, and then connect that to your church to your faith.

You might pick one incident in your life when your faith really came alive, when you just knew Jesus was at work, when God swooped in to protect you or provide for you, or to guide you on the right path. Write it down, share it with someone you know and trust to get their reaction. And if it proves to be an inspiring story, share it with that person God has put in your life, that person who *might* be open to believing and receiving the good news of Jesus Christ. And if there’s any healing to be done, if there are some misguided forces at work – either past or present – if there’s something unsettled between you and the other person, take a cue from Jesus. Go to *that* person first with healing in your heart and make a connection. Just like Jesus went to Simon’s mother-in-law and connected with her, took her hand, and in doing so lifted her up. Just like that, make a connection with the other person, set aside any old hurt or resentment, clear the slate, and say what needs to be said, do what needs to be done to lift that person up, to restore your relationship, to show that God can create something new between the two of you. Now that’s something worth sharing, that’s a message worth proclaiming. And what happens after that, we *wait and see*. Some people get it, and some people don’t. Some people are just not ready, willing or able.

Next week, we’ll look at the choices people make in following Jesus in their lives, or not. We’ll see what Jesus did when people were *drawn* to God but somehow failed to follow though, failed to receive and embrace what God was offering.

But for this week, between now and next Sunday, you have an opportunity to make a difference in the life of another human being. I encourage you to have an honest, faithful conversation with another person between now and next Sunday. Maybe you’ll want to pick someone you know and trust, someone who shares the faith, someone you know from church or Sunday school. In other words, this might be a time for you to practice sharing about your faith, to find out if you have an inspiring story to tell; and trust me, you do. And if you already know that you do than this may be a time for you to get real with someone, someone in your family or at your workplace, or in your school, someone you know who could use – and maybe even deserves – a good word from you. If that’s the case, make it someone in your life you ought to be closer to, *if* it weren’t for something in the past, a difference of opinion, a word or action that still haunts the two of you.

Make it an encounter in the spirit of Jesus Christ, the spirit of reconciliation that calls us today to come to the Lord's Table. And if you struggle with this, call me; I'll guide you through it. Because if it is in your heart to bring someone closer to God, to come alongside someone in a new and promising way, then you can't fail in making an honest connection with another human being. And it's in those honest, faithful connections that we all together truly experience the presence and the power of Jesus Christ, a presence and power that even now can quiet our disease and straighten out our misguided ways. **Amen.**

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most gracious God, we offer our thanks for the gift of your extravagant love given to us in your Son. Grant us the grace to respond in thanksgiving by living in the power of your love. Help us to extend the hand of forgiveness over and over and again and again that we might love as Jesus loved. Help us to grow in our love for each other and in our relationship with you. Let us not count the cost but instead revel in the joy as we experience the power of a nurturing and sustaining love. Heavenly Father, we are so grateful that you hear us and that you care so deeply about us. You know the needs of each person here and, therefore, we trust you with our requests. It seems so often that the pain of our lives is too difficult to bear. But we can rest knowing that you care, that you are sovereign over all, and that nothing is outside of your control. Grant each person here and all your children a deep, true sense of peace, even in the midst of any sorrow or loss. May they know with all their heart that you are listening to their cries, even as you listen to our prayers. And may all our prayers and desires be worked out to your glory, faithful to the prayer that you taught us, when we say together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.