

Epiphany V February 8, 2009

It's a simple little story, but I find the section we just heard from Mark one of the most moving, and most challenging, parts of this Gospel. It's from the first chapter of Mark and it describes the second part of a sort of model day in the ministry of Jesus. We heard the first part of this day last Sunday. Jesus is in Capernaum, a small town northeast of Nazareth—and it's his first stop on the road since his baptism and temptation. He's had a heck of a day—he taught in the synagogue, drove out some unclean spirits, healed, first, Peter's mother-in-law and then, it seems, a good percentage of the whole town. In short, Jesus impressed the socks off everybody—he was probably the most exciting thing that had happened to the town since somebody burned down the tax office. But as interesting as all that was, the real crisis, the really important thing, was what happened next.

Very early the next morning, Jesus went to a lonely place to pray; and while he was there, Peter and the other disciples tracked him down and told him that the whole town was searching for him. Now, there are a couple of hints in the text that something big was going on. First, Mark specifically mentions Jesus in prayer like this only three times in his entire Gospel—and each of these times is associated with a major turning point in Jesus' ministry. Second, the Greek word used to describe the crowds *searching* for Jesus is sinister, it implies malice, or misguided motives. So it's very significant that Jesus, quite suddenly and without looking back, just up and leaves. Now, since Jesus was a big hit; this certainly wasn't a lynch mob after him (*that* comes later). In fact, it was most likely exactly the opposite.

Most likely, the town *really* liked what Jesus had done, and they *really* wanted to keep him there so he could keep on doing it. The group searching for him was probably the first-century equivalent of a joint committee of the ministerial alliance, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Economic Development Board.

They were working on an offer to Jesus that he couldn't refuse: They wanted him to set up shop in Capernaum—establish the *Jesus of Nazareth Preaching and Healing Mission*. The pay and benefits would be great, the hours negotiable, housing would doubtless be provided and taxes could be deferred indefinitely.

There was no doubt that Jesus could really put Capernaum on the map. The tourist trade and healing business would be good for everybody (think Lourdes with a money-back guarantee)—the tax base would grow wonderfully, business would improve and the citizens would have their own miracle worker around the next time *they* got sick. It was a swell deal for everybody. (Really, it *was* a good deal.)

Now, one of the ways we deny Jesus' humanity—and in doing that remove his life from our lives—is by pretending that all of Jesus' decisions were easy and automatic, that it was all reading from a script. That's not how it happened. Jesus knew that the delegation from Capernaum was offering him security, safety, prosperity, and respect. These are things we all want, things everybody has always wanted. They are also things that Jesus knew he would never have if he left that town. If he became their resident rabbi, he wouldn't have to be poor, his family wouldn't think he was crazy, he could have a normal life, he wouldn't have to be cold, hungry, or afraid for his life. In fact, his life would be easier and better in every way *we* consider important.

As we all know, Jesus would not have been the first to trade challenge for security; to exchange the possibility of greatness for the assurance of competence; to swap the call of God for the rewards that come from giving the crowds what they want. Not by a long shot. No, Jesus' decision did not come easily. It was so hard that he did exactly the same thing he did on the night before the crucifixion—he went off by himself to pray—to sweat out a tough decision, to decide which voice to follow:

The voices everyone could hear rolling up the hillside chanting, “We want Jesus”, or the other, quieter voice that said, “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.” He had to choose. There is a very real sense in which all of creation held its breath, waiting to see what would happen.

Of course, Jesus’ story is our story—in basic ways it always is. We know the power of security, prosperity, safety and respect—especially these days. We know how easy it is to settle—to settle for being just a little less than who we know we can be; to listen to those loud voices; to let their expectations rule. After all, there comes a certain point where question like this begin to *matter*; where they begin to cost, where things get painful. And when that happens, the sense of who we are, of what it means to be the beloved child of God, this can easily fade into the background. So we have to make choices and, whether we know it or not, the Lord of heaven and earth waits—to see what will happen. That’s one way we live out this story.

Another way is that we, as the Church, have to make pretty much the same decision that Capernaum had to make. We have to decide what to do about Jesus. We have to decide what to do about this guy who comes to us proclaiming the kingdom of God, and bringing healing, and hope, and a vision of new life. In Capernaum they decided to take the part of Jesus they liked best—a good preacher, an effective healer—and capture it, institutionalize it.

They decided to locate him in *their* place, at *their* convenience, and for *their* purposes. They didn’t want to be challenged, they wanted to be coddled; they didn’t want to see beyond his gift of healing to what that gift might ask of them. They wanted to keep repeating the neat suff. And, in exchange, they were willing to offer him a *very* gilded cage.

Both throughout history and today, the church has faced this temptation of trying to hire Jesus—of assuming the Lord has come for our convenience, as one more resource we have for carrying out our plans. When we yield to that temptation, (as yield we have), we find, sooner or later, and in spite of our best efforts, that the nice house we built for him is empty, and that he has gone on to the next towns. || To be sure, we need to know him like the people in Capernaum did: we need to hear his word, and to know the power, the mercy, and the grace of his healing love. We can do nothing without that. But if we stop there, if we try to limit or control where the Lord is or what he does, if we try to pay him to keep up the good work, then we've missed the point.

Perhaps the only person in Capernaum who really understood all of this was Peter's mother-in-law. We don't know her name, but we do know, from her, the truth. It's simple. "He came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her; and she began to serve them." She didn't try to put Jesus in the medicine cabinet or in a shop down the street. She served. She moved beyond herself and the gift she had been given, to the Lord and his calling. Such is our choice as we live out that part of today's Gospel. As the church, we can try to hire Jesus, or we can strive to serve him, which means to serve as he did. It really is a hard choice, as hard as our personal choices between comfort and faithfulness, as hard as Jesus' choices between taking the cushy job or moving on.

Through the grace of God the Father, Jesus rose from prayer and told Peter and the rest that it was time to go. The people searching for him were disappointed, and the Kingdom of God grew in power. That same grace is offered to us, to all of Christ's Church, as we are called to rise from prayer and to move forward in service. For the Kingdom of God continues to break into our world. And all of creation is waiting to see what will happen.