

## Call to Ministry

Mark 1:29-39

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February 8, 2015

My pastor friend Rob has this church magazine cartoon cut out and stuck on his wall – it pictures a physician in his office, speaking with his bookkeeper. The subject of their conversation is a patient’s bill, which apparently had been in the accounts receivable file for a long, long time. The bookkeeper says to the doctor, “He says that since you told him his recovery was a miracle, he sent his check to the church.”

Our passage from Mark touches on the subject of miraculous healing. This early sequence of events in Jesus’ ministry seems to set the stage for his growing reputation. Mark says, “at once his fame spread everywhere throughout the surrounding region...” (vs. 28), “the whole city was gathered around the door,” “everyone is searching for you,” “Jesus could no longer go into a town openly...and people came to him from every quarter.” (vs. 45)

Invent a better mousetrap, the saying goes, and the world will beat a path to your door. Well, Jesus simply healed people, treated them for the demons that traumatized them and their families, and the people came to him in great mobs and multitudes. Without having moved beyond the very first chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ ministry seems to have turned into an overnight success.

Ask a person on the street what function churches are supposed to fill in our culture, and if they are not outright hostile toward religious faith, they will likely answer that the purpose of the church and its ministry is to do good works, to help make the world a little bit better place. The homeless folks who knock on the church’s door is hoping we will make the world a better place for them. What kind of church worthy of the name wouldn’t do that? It’s a pretty nice arrangement, if that is the purpose of the church. We need to do good things, hosts of people need good things done, and so the world is nicely organized. But today’s lesson from Mark also highlights another definition of ministry, at least the ministry of Jesus. This is important to us, especially today, because we are ordaining and installing people to ministry in the church as Deacons and Elders. What is their ministry to be?

So often, ministry is described in terms of doing: feed the hungry, help shelter the homeless, visit the sick, care for the dying. I dare say many of us would agree.

I suspect that this was also the sort of assumption driving the people who came flocking to see Jesus in the early days of his ministry. Mark tells us that following his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus came to Galilee — this region where today’s passage finds Jesus healing and casting out demons — “proclaiming the good news of God.” That is the very first thing said of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel: that he came proclaiming the good news of God.”

This is the clue that helps us understand why,

when the mobs were beating a path to his door,  
and the disciples came to find him  
so he could continue in his high-growth ministry opportunity,  
that he did not choose the “do-good things” definition of ministry, that he chose instead to  
move on to neighboring towns so that, as he said, “I may proclaim the message there also; *for that is what I came out to do.*”

That is what he came out to do. To proclaim a message. In the process of his proclamation, *healings were signs of the message*, signs meant to serve the message, not the other way around. Jesus fed his own ministry by retreating to quiet places to pray and reflect. He did not become a hyperventilating TV preacher pursuing a non-stop popular ministry. His own disciples seemed eager enough for him to do this, but Jesus knew the focus of his ministry. It included healing and doing good, but healing and doing good did not exhaust the purpose of his ministry. Likely, if we take our cue from him, it should not totally define or characterize ours either.

There’s a story of a wise old who rabbi saw a man hurrying along the street, so preoccupied with his task he was looking neither right nor left.

“Why are you rushing so much?” the rabbi asked the man.

“I’m rushing after my livelihood,” the man answered.

“And how do you know,” asked the rabbi, “that your livelihood is running on before you so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it’s behind you, and all you need to do is stand still.”

Have you heard the type-A personality version of the old “Now I Lay Me Down” child’s bedtime prayer? It goes like this: “Now I wake me up to work, I pray the Lord I will not shirk. If I should die before the night, I pray the Lord my work’s all right.”

It has been said that “most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, work at their play and play at their worship.” All the essential elements of life are there, but their order, and especially their focus, is upside down.

The disciples came to him in a rush of misplaced enthusiasm, “What are you doing out here praying in the desert? The whole town is looking for you; your ministry is a success, come on back and greet the multitudes.” Jesus’ response was not to go back, but rather to press on in pursuit of what he “came out to do.” And that was to “proclaim the message.”

In a word, he came out to preach. To proclaim the truth about God. Everything else about his ministry was secondary to that ultimate goal, to tell the world the truth about a gracious, loving God, who would stop at nothing to communicate his love for them. Marshall McLuhan was not the first to recognize the danger that the medium could become the message. Jesus knew it too, and saw the danger that his healing ministry might so overshadow his proclamation, that he would be reduced to little more than another itinerant side-show miracle worker. He

rejected this role, left Capernaum, and went out through Galilee pursuing his ministry of proclamation, and assisting his message with signs and wonders, but keeping the content of his message ever before him.

The church that takes its cue in ministry from Jesus himself will look long and hard at his statement about his ministry and its purpose. I can't tell you how many hundreds of conversations I have had with people over the years about the things the church ought and ought not do in order to fill the pews, to get people to want to come out to church. More of this sort of music, less of that, more pizzazz, less dogma and doctrine, more entertainment, less preaching and teaching. I've heard it all, and I've heard it a hundred times.

Then I look at the example of Jesus in this simple story. He healed, he cast out demons, and right away, everyone who had a bunion was at the door knocking. But is that what Jesus was about? Did Jesus come into the world — to borrow the language of John — so that he could start a popular healing and exorcism ministry? John says, "In the beginning was the Word..." Mark reports that Jesus' first act in his ministry was the act of proclamation, of preaching.

What would it look like if all of us understood our ministry to be, primarily, one of sharing the good news of Jesus? Would we be out on the street corners with signs and a portable PA system? Would we be going door to door with pamphlets on how to be a Christian in 5 easy steps? No. Is that a sigh of relief I hear? Well, if it doesn't mean *that*, what does it mean?

That is a good question to ask. And I don't think it is one simple answer. In the time with children today, I filled lots of different containers with water. Some small, some large, some in fancy shapes, some more utilitarian. But, they all hold the same substance. Water. Water is a loaded image for us — a symbol of our baptism. In our baptism we bear witness to God's presence and claim in our lives; so the water also becomes a symbol of God's indwelling Holy Spirit. But, in each of our unique lives that water will take on a different shape and purpose. Our ministry together — our individual ministries — will be as unique as we are.

Yet, it is the Holy Spirit who fills each and every one of us. And the Spirit's agenda has not changed: to tell the good news of God's love. And doesn't the world need people of good news? There is an awful lot of bad news out there. War. Terrorism. Disease. Addictions. Poverty. Child abuse. Homelessness. Joblessness. A 24 hour news cycle and a 24 hour work day. Isn't the city around us desperate to hear the good news of God's love and presence with us?

Yes, our ministry together and individually will involve doing — but it must flow from our identity as God's messengers of good news. Messengers of love. Messengers of hope.

As we ordain and install church leaders today, deacons and elders, reflect on this question: how will my ministry tell the good news?

There is a whole city outside our door. What do we have to tell them about Jesus and God's love?