

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 3.7-12
The Last Resort
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Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!' But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

A few years ago I was given a packet of papers from the 1960s. This is not uncommon. People clean out desks and closets and they come upon old bulletins, picture directories, and annual reports. Upon finding these, they think, the pastor will want to see these. And they are right.

I treasure these. The treasure is not only in looking back and seeing the church 50 years ago, the treasure is also to see what they found important, so important that they kept it 50 years. Sure some things are kept because people often lack the energy to purge old records. But, sometimes, the item kept is a window.

One such window was in a packet dropped by my office a few years ago. Amidst the bulletins and campaign material that remodeled and restored fellowship hall, amidst the photo directories was a sermon from the 1960s. It was a sermon given by the Rev. Jack Smiley. Rev. Smiley was the pastor here from 1960 to 1985; this was an early sermon. That it was reproduced as a pamphlet tells me it was a popular one.

The sermon was about the youth of the day. Given this is the 1960s we are talking about my curiosity was piqued. Rev. Smiley was not impressed. The young of the day were not motivated; they lacked the work ethic of their prior generations; they were loose with morality. Yet, his sermon was not just a list of generalities about the generation. There was a problem. There was trouble in River City and it wasn't pool. The threat and scourge of the day was the drive-in movie theater. Rev. Smiley made it clear in no uncertain terms that this drive-in business was driving our teens to hell. I don't think he doubled down on the drive metaphor, but I think it is a nice touch.

I smiled when I read the sermon because it reminded me of two things. First it reminded me of the chorus of complaints I get about the millennials and the new generation. This new generation that needs safe spaces, the snowflake jibes, the chorus of complaints that often begin with, "when I was young." I smile because I think the next generation is alright. The kids are alright.

I also smile because of another sermon I received. This one was about 100 years old. It was in a stack of sermons a granddaughter inherited. Her grandfather was a Presbyterian pastor and he not only wrote out his sermons, he also had impeccable penmanship. One sermon from the stack has stayed with me. The pastor, writing around the turn of the century, railed against the young generation; they were unmotivated; they lacked a good work ethic; they were loose with morality.

Like Rev. Smiley, this pastor had an example, evidence of the depravity. These young people are slipping into moral peril because all they want to do, night and day, all they want to do is gather around a piano and sing songs. I kept waiting for accusations of drunkenness, debauchery, even elicit lyrics in the songs. Nope. That these kids wanted to gather and sing was way outside the box. They were on the wrong path.

There is a very natural and persistent temptation that comes to us. The temptation is to see the world as something we manage, something we determine and direct. We are in charge. We may not be delusional enough to believe we are in control, but we are the responsible parties. There are things to be done; fights to be fought; wars to be won. There is trouble right here in River City and we need to act.

We are tempted to develop a vision, a mission, a plan rife with strategic initiatives that take us to a goal. If we set our minds to it, we can bring about a better future; if we apply our best effort and focus our energies upon what is best, then we will build a better tomorrow. And if only we could just get these kids in line, there would be no stopping us.

Many years ago, twenty-four actually, I was interviewing for my first call. During the interview process, the senior pastor took me to the large downtown bank which was down the block from this large downtown church. That I was being taken to the real interview was clear to me. This was a stakeholder in the church, maybe the funding for my potential position. The president of the bank got right down to business. "So, Fred, what are you going to do with these kids?"

Without blinking I said, "I got to be honest. Kids kind of creep me out. I haven't a clue what do with them. But I have put on a few pounds in seminary and chasing young people around I figured would be a good way of losing weight and being paid."

Probably my favorite interview moment of all time. Surprisingly I was not offered the position. The chair of the search committee actually called to apologize. He said, "Fred, we love you man; we want you bad; but that senior pastor oh he hates you." And that was okay. The call process is a discernment and this interview made it clear to me I would never be a good person to "do something with these kids." And I also discerned within a few months the senior pastor and I would be at odds shall we say- sixes and sevens.

There is a temptation out there when we see problems, when we see the chaos of life, the degradation of our society; there is a temptation to form a plan of correction. We need to solve the ills, staff the problem, work the plan. And please do not half-understand me; I love planning. We are redoing our facility master plan right now and I love it because it works. I like financial plans because of the clarity they bring. Staffing plans, development plans, master plans, strategic plans, done them; enjoy them. But there is a moment where we take the value of planning that works with buildings and we try to bring it to people, to a generation, to a culture, and everything goes sideways.

Most of the time when I hear people trying to speak prophetically, trying to speak the hard truth, most of the time such speech is the bad fruit of failed expectations. If we can just get these people into line, if we can just help people see, if we can just make it reasonable, then things will go in the right direction. We will be on the right path.

At first blush it may not be easy to see the chaos of our passage today. It looks like success. The whole region is flocking to Jesus. Things are really getting cooking. Jesus is wildly popular. This is the success of a great marketing campaign. Jesus' plan is working. Well, no. Jesus' plan is not working.

In our passage today, there is a glaring omission: Jesus doesn't preach. To proclaim that the kingdom of God has come and we should repent and believe is his mission. This is the strategic plan of Jesus. This is the plan John made clear: God so loves the world, he gave his son; his son came not to condemn, but to reconcile.

The plan of Jesus, as Mark records, begins in baptism. Seeing we are a beloved of God we are led to repent, to find the power of humility; and we are called to believe mercy is our strength. This is the plan of Jesus; what he says he came to do. He says, I have come to proclaim the good news. In our passage today, Jesus doesn't teach, preach, proclaim. In fact, his only instruction is to insure he has an escape boat; his only direction is to tell the demons to be quiet. The image of Jesus here is not of someone who is in control, but someone who is struggling with the chaos of life, how things can get wildly out of control.

He is doing good things. People are healed; the demons are being bound and people are being freed. This is good. But the healings were meant to demonstrate a way to live; they were not the gospel he came to offer. His gospel is very, very simple: live in humility and offer mercy; this is the kingdom of God. Be meek and be compassionate and you will be free.

As we saw in Capernaum, if you have a choice between control and compassion, choose compassion. This is his gospel. That he chose to heal demonstrates this (he is compassionate) is great; but the greater message is getting lost. The message is becoming Jesus heals; the greater message needs to be: we can all heal. We need to be merciful. Jesus is a path, not a destination. The people don't want to hear; they want to be healed.

It's good if we remember why Mark gave his gospel. The church of his generation was deeply convinced that Jesus was the Son of God, the resurrected one who defeated death, and sits at the right hand of God. They were deeply, deeply convinced that believing in his death and resurrection brought eternal life as a surety. You will inherit eternal life. Mark wrote to this church to say, your confidence of heaven is not what Jesus lived on earth. His life was not a clear cut conclusion but a wading into the chaos of life, the brokenness. He healed people who had no idea of his gospel; he gave his life in fragments and confusion, not clarity.

The cosmic Jesus of the early church (the new Adam, the one before whom all will kneel, the eternal word), not really the image we can see in our reading today. Today we are met with the swirl of life, the ambiguity we know, the futility of plans meant for people. The early church Mark wrote to was convinced that they loved Jesus; they were less convinced that they loved each other. They were unconvinced because people make a mess of things; people don't fit in our boxes; they make a hash of our plans. If only people fell into line with the cosmic Jesus, then all life would be good. If only these kids would clean up their act!

I am not sure, still, what to do with these kids. My best guess was to take them on mission trips, take them into our community to do works of compassion. My vision, my plan was to help them learn only one teaching of Jesus: it is not enough to know the good, you must do the good. Not a very elaborate plan. It was certainly very uncosmic. The focus was on action and lite on theological discourse. I am uncertain if this was the best plan. Yet, I wonder if Jesus had a similar moment of wonder on the lakeshore. Maybe his plan was going south; maybe he needed to speak more. His only sermon of the day: be silent.

The demons proclaimed his cosmic status. And he told them to be quiet. Perhaps that is the great lesson of our reading today. Trust the silence of the good deed; trust the silence of compassion and mercy.

We don't often trust silence. It is, in essence, our last resort. We like the one with answers; the people who can articulate the elaborate plan. We need to hire someone who knows what to do with these kids. We do because they are heading to the drive-in and spending too much time around the piano.

We don't trust silence. What a different passage we would have today if it began, seeing that no would listen to him, he told they must hear his teachings and agree with him before he would heal them. They must pledge him allegiance in order to receive his blessing. The people must wait till the day appointed for healing; this day is for preaching. You must listen before you are cared for. What a different message that would be. But it sounds like a reasonable plan.

Jesus' plan began by finding John in the desert. Finding the wild man eating bugs and honey and wearing animal skins, he waded into the muddy water of the Jordan where it meets the Dead Sea. There he was blessed; he humbled himself and came as a sinner and heard the great words of baptism: you are my beloved. I am happy with you. His big plan was to take this blessing and give it away; tell people they are beloved and we can live in humility and compassion with one another.

Every teaching, every healing, every act of Jesus after his baptism comes back to this baptismal confidence, this baptismal plan. In our reading today we see how such a simple plan fares with the chaos of life. Although a bit lacking on details, I want to say this is still the best plan, our only plan. Walk humbly, love mercy, do justice. Perhaps in living this plan, the silence of doing good can become our first impulse and not our last resort. Amen.