

Work to Do

There will always be people that even Jesus himself can't reach. It's not that he doesn't love them, it's not that they are somehow predestined for perdition, it's just that sometimes, some people, just can't accept who Jesus is and what he is doing. In those moments where I get discouraged about the church, I remember that we could probably actually have Jesus physically present, we might be able to heal and cast out many demons, but there would still be people who just wouldn't accept it.

All these good things that Jesus did, the reputation he had, it means nothing when he comes home. Which is yet another example, this time not specifically involving priests and scribes, where what people think they know keeps them from actually seeing and appreciating what is. I think, as with last week, there is a connection between the two stories that we get back to back in Mark chapter 6. Jesus is shunned and rejected in Nazareth, and then he sends his disciples out to start doing the things that he did: teaching and healing. He warns them that it's not always going to be successful, there might be some people who don't want to hear it.

We get paralyzed by that reality. I know I do. I want to share the good news with people, but what if they don't want to hear it, or can't hear it from me? What if there were people in the world who for some reason couldn't accept God's grace from Jesus himself? These are pretty serious questions for the church to answer, in fact, I think it is quite possibly the reason why there is a church.

Think about this, who we are and what we do is supposed to be centered on Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection. We also have his teachings and some record of his deeds recorded by four different witnesses. There are some extra-biblical sources you might draw upon should you choose, but most of us have enough to work with in the four Gospels. Then we have Paul and the other writers of pastoral letters to help us sort out what a community of Jesus followers might look like and how to sort out some of the trouble spots. All in all though, our New Testament is a lot shorter than the Hebrew Scriptures, and it doesn't even really tell us how to make a Priest's ephod just right, nor does it contain exhaustive lists of rules, genealogies, or even a collection of decent hymns. It is woefully inadequate to starting a full-fledged religion. We had to get a bunch of stuff from other sources.

The core of Jesus ministry on earth was his disciples. They saw what he did and they heard his teachings. We know they were not perfect, we know they were constantly missing the point, but we also know that they were the plan, and there is no back up. They needed to know, as we do, that there is no message so pure and perfectly delivered that it will get through to everyone; that idea is an illusion and a stumbling block. I wonder sometimes what the church would look like if the reformation never happened and the only churches were either Roman Catholic or Orthodox. Both of those churches have managed to hold their own through the modern era on the grounds that many, many people find their primary religious identity at birth, and the fact that traditions and rituals are absolutely enough to hold most people's loyalty. But I wonder where we would be now, if it was Roman Catholic or bust, would Christianity still be the largest religion in the world? I suspect not.

I also wonder, given these examples from the Gospel, if it was ever intended to be what it has become. Is it supposed to be held together by dogma and doctrine? Is it supposed to be wealthy and powerful? Is it supposed to be a huge institution of any kind? My suspicion is that the answer to those questions is, "No!" As a member of the clergy, a "religious professional," the fact that the answer is no makes me

a little nervous. It means that a lot of what I spend my time doing and my energy building is sort of beside the point of the actual Gospel.

The thing is, Jesus is not enough. I know that sounds bad, I don't really like saying it. Jesus, the first century Jewish craftsman who became a healer and a teacher, will not convince everyone, he couldn't even convince everyone in his little hometown. The stories of the miracles will not convince everyone. Even the event of the resurrection will not convince everyone, because like Thomas, we won't believe what we did not see. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," indeed it is a blessing to be able to believe in God's grace and mercy, it makes your life much better and healthier and it allows you to always live in hope, but that doesn't mean everyone can or will do it.

This is a sticky wicket for sure, it is what led John Calvin and other reformers to develop the doctrine of election, also called predestination. Why do some believe and others not? If we say that salvation is an act of grace, that it is not a matter of participating in the mass or receiving absolution from a priest, which many people at that time had been taught to believe from their baptism forward, what is this thing called salvation? It can't be something that rests in human hands can it? The Reformed tradition puts it entirely in God's hands, which was meant to be a comfort to those who were shrugging off what had surely become an oppressive and corrupt priesthood, but well... they may have abstracted things a bit too much. They may have neglected the very sin at the core of so much of what they were protesting in the Roman Church. They may have actually tried to replace corrupt bishops and wicked popes with an idea of God that is not actually God. See the problem is that some people do not hear and do not believe seemingly any human source, and in those cases it is far too easy to just call them reprobates and sinners and give up, but in doing that we go against the very example of Jesus, who reached out to the ones who were decidedly on the outs with polite, religious society. The doctrine of election, indeed any doctrine or dogma can fail in exactly the same way, because Jesus and what he shows us is the Living God. Our job as church is not to "believe," but to live in relationship to God. Jesus shows us how.

There is an antidote to both priestly corruption and theological abstraction in Reformed theology, it is called the priesthood of all believers, which means that we all participate in the Ministry of God's Holy Spirit, following the example and the instructions of Jesus of Nazareth. We know him, we follow him, we are called. We believe in him, but we also do what he did, we become his disciples.

The reason is this: there may be someone who needs to hear the Gospel from you. You may be God's messenger to them, and maybe just inviting them to church isn't going to cut it, because what if I'm not the guy they need to see and hear, what if you are? Pay attention to this, some people will not believe Jesus himself, some people will not believe Peter or Paul, but everyone, somehow, some way, needs to know that God's grace is for them. Some will need to see miracles, others will not believe even if there are miracles, others will simply explain the miracles away. The core reality though is that God's Spirit is in us, and God's creative work is us, and Jesus shows us that perfectly and beyond all comparison, but we need to continually find our part in that movement of Grace, that is what the church is supposed to be, but not always what she is. We need to work on that.