

Sent to Serve

Today is the day of Trinity Cathedral's annual meeting. Some clergy would give a State of the Parish sermon on this day. I've never been one to do that. For one thing, everything I want to say is already in the annual report. For another, I don't like the parallel with presidential State of the Union speeches. In our current charged political climate, no one really listens to anyone; everyone is thinking about what their response will be. And finally, I'm really a lectionary kind of guy. I like the way the lectionary forces us to confront Bible passages that we might otherwise avoid. So right now I'm breaking one of the cardinal rules of preaching: I'm telling you what I'm not going to talk about. This will not be a state of the parish presentation.

As the lectionary takes us through the Sundays of Epiphany and into Lent, and then later through the season after Pentecost, it will move us through the Gospel of Mark. On that journey through Mark you'll hear a lot about authority and about power. Who has it? How is it used? What does it mean?

We got a glimpse of that in this morning's Gospel passage. You might have noticed that it came from the first chapter, at only the 21st verse. In other words, we've hardly begun the Gospel and already Jesus is in the thick of things. That's characteristic of Mark. He has a story he's burning to tell, and he's not about to waste any time telling it. Jesus is already teaching in the synagogue.

The strange thing is, Jesus didn't do what every other teacher had done. He didn't quote Scripture to support what he said. Instead, he talked as though he were the Word of God himself. And the people noticed. They were astounded, in fact. They were even more amazed when he commanded an unclean spirit to come out of a man. Where did all of this authority come from?

What drives Mark's story forward is that we know the source of Jesus' authority even if the crowd doesn't. But there's more going on here than just teaching and healing. Mark is establishing the cosmic background to everything that happens on earth. Ultimately this will be a test of power between God and Satan, seen here as between Jesus and demons. The earthly equivalent will be a contest between Jesus and the religious authorities. Jesus is clearly in control here. Power resides with God.

Now all of this talk about Satan and demons and unclean spirits does not sit well for many people today. I get that. I spent a good portion of my life teaching a discipline that focuses on the material world to the exclusion of the spiritual one. Yet I am also well aware, as you must be, that there is evil in the world greater than any one human being. I have no problem in personifying that great evil as Satan, nor of the ways in which we are individually tempted to follow evil as demons. To name something is to objectify it and provide a way of recognizing and ultimately controlling it. To name the powers of evil allows us to fight those same powers.

Paul did this for the Corinthians in his letter that we heard this morning. For people at that time, about the only meat that was available was from animals which had been sacrificed to the Roman gods. Some of this meat showed up in the marketplace, and some was served in banquet halls adjacent to pagan temples. Christians newly converted from paganism were often scandalized when they saw fellow Christians eating such meat.

Paul knew that the pagan idols had no real power or authority, but he also knew that acting on that superior “knowledge” could cause real harm in the community. Better than knowledge was love, Paul said. Better than the power of temptation was the power of God. Don’t criticize the weak, he said. Instead, make sure you do nothing to make the weak stumble.

Concern for others rather than pride in self. That’s the Jesus way. People who have come to this cathedral in the last few years have told me what a welcoming place it is. That’s wonderful. We are beginning to see Jesus in one another and in all who come to be with us. We are making space for everyone, seeking and serving Christ in others, not only outside of this building but within it.

One of the most remarkable things in the Gospel of Mark is that after many examples of using his authority to preach, teach, and heal, Jesus made it clear that his power is for service, not control. When the disciples got angry at James and John because they’d asked to be at the right and left hand of Jesus, in positions of power and authority, he told them all: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

There are many ways in which we are called to serve. I’m thrilled that in this year’s annual report, the outreach report is one of the longest sections. If you include one of Trinity’s largest and longest-standing outreach efforts, Positive Parenting at Trinity, outreach fills six pages. In the five years that I have been the Dean, outreach has increased exponentially thanks to the dedicated commitment of passionate people who have recruited others to help them. Of that we can all be proud. We are learning what it means to serve rather than be served.

Where will we go next? How will we bring others along with us? Where will we use the power and authority of God for service in the name of Jesus Christ? I’ve not given a state of the parish address today because I do not want to spend much time looking in the rear view mirror. I’d rather have all of us look through a big windshield to see where we might be going. Where is God taking us? How will God use us to further the coming of the kingdom, to bring justice and hope as well as provide for the everyday needs of those in our community? Pray, brothers and sisters, pray that God will continue to use us to bless this world that so desperately needs the light of Christ. Pray that we will support one another in that effort. And then go out to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world.

[Epiphany 4: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28.]