

“A NEW TEACHING”

Galatians 6:1-10; Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2024

Rev. Jerry Duggins

Other congregations don't do things the way we do things. I was reminded of this last week while moderating another session. They were discussing their process for canceling worship, and it was mentioned that at Westminster we don't cancel services. Everyone here knows that if the roads look too dangerous, you stay home and catch the livestream. The downside of this is that if you're a regular in-person attender, you probably underestimate our attendance. We averaged 83, up 13% from the previous year. Some of this is from receiving new members, and some just from the fact that we count our online participants. Since livestreaming, we've seen occasional attenders become frequent and there are some who join us every week even though you may not see them in the sanctuary.

Since March of 2020, we have been intentionally pursuing new ways of being a faith community. If you're livestreaming this morning, you are part of this worshipping community and we count you, because you are present, as present as Jesus is when we break the bread in communion. We count you because you matter to us. When you fly south for the winter, you can still be with us. If you wake up sick, you can still join us. If the roads are too dangerous, you can still show up. And you do. It's a new way of being church, that is keeping us alive and vibrant and growing.

Other churches have not done so well. Maybe they didn't have the skills? Maybe they were only interested in stop gap measures until they could return to doing church the old way? Somehow, this church, which has always valued its life together saw the threat that the pandemic presented to community and refused to give in.

So we changed things. We introduced and tinkered with not only the technology around livestreaming, but also with our attitude toward it. We began to see technology as a means to build relationships instead of as a distraction undermining our humanity. We carried on our ministries by zoom. We made more phone calls. We sent cards. We kept up Bible study, adult education. The deacons continued to gather electronically to talk about your needs and how they could help. We changed the way we do joys and concerns so that more people know more of what's going on in the lives of this congregation, not just those present on Sunday morning. Changes made here have made us a better praying community.

It may be that this strengthening of our sense of community is what is driving an increasing commitment to mission, that alongside our growing concern for what's happening in our world. We've re-established a hands-on relationship with Loaves and Fishes, started a warming center for the unhoused, and continue to explore responses to racism in our racial equity group.

I feel like we're doing what Paul urges on the churches in Galatia at the end of that reading: "let us not grow weary in doing what is right... whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for the family of faith."

But are we ready for Mark's Jesus? Gary Charles writes: "Dare to preach the Jesus who does not appear first in a manger in Mark's Gospel wrapped in swaddling clothes, but appears first knee-deep in the Jordan with the heavens ripped open, indicating that the reign of God is set loose on the earth" (p. 37).

Apparently the folks in Capernaum weren't. They were amazed at Jesus when he turned up to speak at their synagogue, amazed that he didn't do what every other speaker did on the Sabbath. He spoke as one with authority, not as the scribes. The scribes would read a scripture and give an interpretation based on other scriptures. They would never interject their own ideas. Always, their interpretation was defended by citing other scripture. We don't know what Jesus said here, only that he spoke as one with authority. In other words, they were his own ideas. It's a different gospel, but you might think along the lines of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,'... but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment..."

They call it "a new teaching." Are we ready for that? We don't know what he said in the synagogue. To this point in the gospel, he has announced the reign of God is near and called some disciples to "follow" him. Are we ready for the nearness of God? Are we ready to follow where Jesus leads? Are we ready to do what Jesus does in this first encounter with evil?

A man with an "unclean spirit" turns up, recognizes Jesus, and challenges him. Jesus' only words recorded in this story are to the demon: "Be silent, and come out of him!" Are we prepared to silence evil? Is that what's being asked of us? Matthew Myer Boulton says of this passage: "Jesus comes into the world as a healing liberator in direct, authoritative opposition to the death-dealing forces of evil and ruin in the world." That seems a little beyond my skill set! And yet as Boulton goes on to say, "As Mark tells it, when Jesus says to the disciples, 'Follow me,' he means follow him into the fray, into the shadows, into the menace itself. He means follow him into the work of building up from the ruins, of freeing the captives...."

If that's the message, how do we get from where we are (feeling inadequate for the task) to where we need to be (proclaimers of God's presence in a weary and often wicked world)? If I put myself into this story, I am right there with the crowd, astounded and amazed. When I think of where this church has come since March 2020, I am also astounded and amazed, but there's a difference. In Capernaum, I'm just a spectator. At Westminster, I've been a participant in the changes. In writing of Mark's Jesus, Charles urges us: "Just get out of the way, and stand not in amazement, but in faith, at what this Jesus can "teach" the church."

Get out of the way, step aside, and let Jesus lead and... pay attention to where he goes, what he says, and what he does. He doesn't just silence the demon. He frees a man. He'll travel around Galilee, freeing people from their demons, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, eating with outcasts, challenging the status quo. Pay attention to where those places are in our world. What are the things that hold people captive? Where are people held down in poverty, limited because of their race or ethnicity? What "fray" are we being asked to enter?

We don't know what Jesus said in the synagogue on that particular Sabbath day. All we know is that he called disciples and he announced God's presence and he cast out a demon freeing a man caught up in evil. What he said and did seemed like a new teaching to the people. And the people wondered about it.

We could sit around wondering about it as well. We could debate whether demons were real or not. We could skip that argument and jump right to the many ways in which people today seem possessed. And we could be amazed at those who help people work through their addictions, work to transform angry people from haters to lovers, engage in challenging the structures that hold people in poverty. We can admire the peacemakers, the healers, the advocates for justice. The world needs a new teaching. And if we open eyes and unstop our ears, we can hear the new teaching today and see the things that embody that teaching. And we can be amazed.

But that isn't following. That isn't yet faith. This program year we are focusing on being intentional about our faith. You'll hear details about that from leaders in this church during the annual meeting. You'll hear about some of the things we've done and some of the things we intend to do. All of those things flow from our conviction that God is present in our world today. And that presence continues to remake the world as it did when Jesus walked the earth.

As the disciple responded to Jesus' call, so we too respond to God as we embrace the "new teaching," a teaching we discern as we pay attention to the cries for help from our world: cries from the hungry and poor, cries from the earth itself, cries from the oppressed, from the isolated, from the abandoned. We've focused most recently on "engaging the world" through helping ministries and increasing our understanding of the form injustice takes today; but we're also attending to other (one might say more traditional) ways in which God speaks. We listen and expect to hear a word from God when we worship. We continue to study scripture, to pray, to explore our own spirituality. We expect to be strengthened in faith as we live in and expand our faith community.

There is a lot to this new teaching. No words are attached to Mark's introduction, but Jesus does act, providing a clue. The teaching comes slowly as we follow Jesus through Mark's gospel. But come, it will. The understanding comes in the following, and following comes in the living. And the living happens in the context of a faith community. The reign of God has come near, said Jesus. It is still here, waiting to be discerned, waiting to be revealed, waiting for us to follow. That's what we're trying to do here at Westminster. We're trying to be a faith community in which God's presence is known and experienced.

We trying to be a faith community that bears witness to the love of God, that is willing to live out that love in the world. It's amazing. It's challenging. Are we ready to embrace it? Are we ready to live it out in faith through Christ? Amen.

Resources:

Charles, Gary W. in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY, 2014.

Boulton, Matthew Myer. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-commentary-epiphany-week-4>