

When we are true to God's Mission, God Changes Lives

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, February 4, 2018¹

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey,

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Mark 1:29-39 (NRSV): *Now Jesus left the synagogue at Capernaum, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.*

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

What is your measure of success? We can think of success as individuals or in career or company. This parish is doing well financially and busy with people active in ministry. Are we successful in business or church or life when everyone is happy and resources are plentiful? That sounds successful, of course. That also sounds like the US housing market in 2007.

In any endeavor, what counts for success? Sports teams get caught up in glamor, politicians get caught up in power, businesses and churches get comfortable and complacent. They may look successful, but their foundations get weaker and weaker, until the whole enterprise collapses. Somewhere along the line, they lost track of their mission.

Notice how Jesus responded to his success in today's Gospel reading. He certainly looked successful. He was so popular that crowds of people came to him to be healed. As a business opportunity, you would think that he would capitalize on his success and build a growing medical practice there in Capernaum. He certainly had a good customer base already, with growing brand recognition. But that's not Jesus' measure of success. That's not off track just because of Jesus' lack of business priorities. Nor is this off track due to some lack of desire by Jesus to heal people. In fact, Jesus continued to heal people and deliver them from evil. So how did Jesus respond to what looks to us like success?

First, he went out under cover of darkness to a deserted place alone to pray. How many of us take time to do this? In the middle of a stretch of success, how many of us take real alone time with God to pray? We don't know what Jesus prayed about, but the next thing he did was to leave Capernaum. So I wonder if Jesus was checking-in with God the Father for guidance in his mission. Jesus came out on a mission. What was the Father's idea of success?

Secondly, and closer to my theme this morning, examine what Jesus did after he prayed, and in response to his success. Simon and other disciples found him and said "*Everyone is searching for you.*" Jesus responded "*Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the*

¹ In preparing this sermon, I kept returning to themes I had explored before. So some of this will be familiar, and some will be fresh.

message there also. For this is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

To Jesus, success looks like staying true to his mission. Jesus could have done wonderfully good things in Capernaum—godly and kind things. This would have been good work, but it would have been off target from his mission. He came to proclaim the message to the whole area in word and action. So that is what he did. Jesus was successful because he stayed true to his mission.

Just imagine a professional football team. This team pours time and energy in to great uniforms, a fancy new stadium, fun and exciting tailgate parties, catchy advertisements, entertaining stadium music, great cheers, top notch food and the fanciest jumbotron in the league. But even with all this great secondary stuff, their success still boils down to one question: can the team play? If the team doesn’t focus on playing football well, then none of the rest matters. As a lifelong Cleveland Browns fan, I can tell you, focus on mission is essential...

I was once part of a church in St. Louis, Missouri that was one of the largest parishes in the Diocese of Missouri. Do you know how many parking spaces this church has? Two. How could a church with only two parking spaces become one of the largest parishes in the diocese? I believe it is because they were true to their mission of worshipping, seeking and serving God. This was a place where Jesus Christ was present, where the Holy Spirit was active, where the grace of God was shared and lives were renewed beyond any cost. That was worth parking on the street and walking a half mile for hundreds of people each week. Why? Because they were true to their mission.²

When we stay on mission as disciples of Jesus Christ, God works through us to change lives for the better. Like Paul, who writes in today’s lesson that he has a commission, we also have a commission from God. We pursue this mission at church, school, work, and with our friends and neighbors. When we are true to that mission, God works through us to change lives. We may not always see what God is doing, or we may only see part of it as God uses what we offer. But when we’re on mission, God changes lives.

As Christians, we have felt the impact of others in our own lives who have stayed true to their mission from God. Through God’s grace working in others, we have discovered God’s love and God’s power. We have been freed by God’s grace from guilt and shame. God has empowered us to live healthy lives that make a difference. Some of these people went beyond their comfort zone and chose risk to bring us the Good News. When they were on mission, God made a difference in our lives.

We also have choices in our lives. Some of them sound clear. You can choose between cheating on your taxes or maintaining your integrity, even when it costs you. For teenagers—and for adults too, you have a choice at a party when someone invites you to a drinking game, or offers you drugs. You can choose between sharing a malicious rumor against someone, or you can stand in the way of malice and call for justice and understanding and reconciliation.

² They had weaknesses, as all churches do, but there was something energizing and compelling about their devotion that made the parking issues irrelevant.

Some choices are more subtle. You might have a choice between making someone happy and standing for what's right. Both of those are good, aren't they? It is good to make someone happy. It is good to stand for what's right. But sometimes you have to choose between two good things to stay true to God's mission.

As a church, which is closer to our mission? We can stay within our walls and enjoy the relationships we have here, or we can reach out to the community around us, just as Jesus did. This is a church that builds close friendships. Those friendships are good for the life of the church. But think of how Jesus took a good thing and brought it closer to his mission by going beyond Capernaum. We can practice that personal friendliness not only with those in the pews here, but also with friends at work, or with the guy who lives in the apartment upstairs, or with the classmate you just met.

When a hungry homeless person at MUST ministries finds a warm breakfast and encouragement and prayers from our parishioners who serve there, we are on mission, and God changes lives. When a lay person trained as a Stephen Minister brings confidence in God's grace to someone overwhelmed with chaos and stress, we are on mission, and God changes lives. When we listen for God in a Bible Study, we are on mission, and God changes lives. When our worship services point beyond ourselves to lift people into the presence of God, we are on mission and God changes lives. When we support a youth ministry committed to sharing the love of Jesus Christ with teenagers, we are on mission and God changes lives.

Our mission matters not because of what *we* can do, but because of what *God* can do in us. Our mission is not good news because of how great we are, but because of how great God is. And God stays on mission with us. Jesus turned away from his own advantage to spread the good news of God's grace beyond Capernaum. He came out to proclaim the message—to heal us and deliver us from evil. He even went to Jerusalem to bring the good news even though he knew he would be crucified for doing so.

What was Jesus' measure of success? In all the good things Jesus could have done, he chose to stay on mission for us. He chose to give himself for us that we might have life—life stronger than death and stronger than the challenges of living.

The Good News of a relationship with God in Jesus Christ is more powerful than any side project or hobby that the church could do. We stay on mission with Jesus because Jesus stays on mission with us, and he changes lives in the process. When we stay on mission with Jesus, we participate in the joy of new life in ourselves and others. This is the most valuable thing there is!

Pursuing our mission of Growing Disciples of Jesus Christ is our measure of success. God's vision for us is a Christian Community, empowered by the Holy Spirit, active in the worship of God, Discipleship for all ages, Serving Christ in the world. We stay true to this mission and vision because they represent the greatest blessing anyone can know. When we are true to God's mission, God changes lives.