

Sermon: "Go and DO Likewise."
Sunday, February 5, 2012
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Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Epiphany V, Year B: Mark 1:29-39

Lately I have been speaking about the need for we Christians to focus less on belief in the deity of Christ - as expressed in the Church's creeds and doctrines - and more on following the example of the human Jesus that we have revealed to us in the Gospels. My comments have passed as either benign ones with little reaction or have caused heads to jerk up. I recently mentioned this need to refocus our theology in a presentation I did at Fresh Start - which is a program for newly ordained and employed priests - two weeks ago. I am convinced that one of newly ordained clergy in the Diocese was so shocked by my comments, that he is now convinced that I am a heretic! Maybe you feel equally as scandalized by my statement.

But there is good reason for this re-focusing. And I am not alone in this conviction.

This shift in focus to have us more closely follow the human Jesus versus just expressing a belief in the cosmic deity of Christ that the Church has constructed in her theology and doctrines, is not something new or original. I wish I could lay claim to it, but I can't. Albert Schweitzer, that great philosopher and medical missionary of the last century, noted that, "What has been passing for Christianity during these nineteen centuries is merely a beginning, full of weaknesses and mistakes, not a full grown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus."

More recently there has been a growing trend among many Christian theologians, seminary professors, Biblical scholars and writers, as well as clergy and lay people, on this topic. This re-focusing of how we express our Christian faith is clearly a part of that tectonic shift called the Emergent Church that is taking place in Christianity.

What is clear as a result of the study and theological reflection that the Church is engaged in, is that the Christian faith has acquired a lot of excess baggage in the ways of belief systems and doctrines over the centuries that doesn't have much - if anything - to do with Jesus. This is especially true since Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. I had a seminary professor who once quipped that when the Empire picked up the cross the Church laid hers down.

I think it is fair to say that this baggage of elaborate belief systems, dogmas and rules and regulations is often a distraction from - and at times even a distortion of - Jesus' message in the Gospel.

In order to correct this – in church lingo we would say reform this situation - and put us back on the path of faith Jesus calls us too, we need to return to following the essential practices of Jesus as relayed in the Gospel narratives.

Examining these source texts of Christianity we come to realize that our faith is less about adhering to doctrines and beliefs about Christ, than it is about *praxis*, which is the practice - or more succinctly put - the following of Jesus. Simply stated, if we examine the Jesus of the Gospels we discover that the Christian life *is not so much about believing things* about Jesus, but rather about *doing the things that Jesus did*.

The perfect distillation of this idea is expressed in a contemporary version of the creed we occasionally use in one of our alternative liturgies at Christ Church that states, Jesus "wants not to be idolized but to be followed."

When Albert Schweitzer spoke of those weaknesses and mistakes that the Church made in her first nineteen centuries, one of the things he was speaking of is the emphasis of the Church on idolizing Christ through our belief systems, over and above the practice of following Jesus in our day-to-day life.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan offers us a key witness to this truth. At the conclusion of the parable Jesus asks the expert in the law to whom he told the story, "Which of these three [the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan] do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

"The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had compassion on him.'

"Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

Jesus did not say, "So believe this is true and go write it up in a tidy set of beliefs that get bound in a nice book." He said, "Go and DO likewise!" Go and practice compassion and all these other things I am showing you to do, which are the ways of the Kingdom of God.

In his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul undergirds this command of Jesus when he says, "If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me." What Paul is saying is that we can proclaim that we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord," until the proverbial cows come home. It is only until we come to the realization that we have an obligation laid upon us *to do the things of the Gospel*, that we truly live the faith Jesus desires us to live. It is when we become the person Jesus calls us to be.

Today's Gospel from Mark opens with Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. It is a rich story, teaching us how to fulfill the obligations laid on us by the Gospel to follow Jesus.

"Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told [Jesus] 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."

Some people who hear this story see it in a very cynical light. "Isn't nice that Jesus healed this sick woman so that she could serve him and the boys a nice big Jewish lunch," they quip. But that view is contrary to almost every other encounter Jesus had with women, whom he held in high regard and treated as equals. I do not think for a moment that this event is some sort of lapse on Jesus' part, with him reverting to stereotypical male expectations to be served by women. Rather this passage speaks a much deeper truth.

The verb to serve in this passage is the same one used when the angels, "waited on" Jesus in the wilderness. (Mk. 1:13). Later Jesus will use this same verb to describe himself as the, "one who comes to serve." (Mk. 10:45.) With this understanding, when Simon's mother-in-law serves the group lunch, she embodies the ideal of discipleship as one who serves others by following the witness of Jesus, the one who came to serve. Today's Gospel is really all about Jesus role-modeling and calling us to compassionate service. In compassionate service he healed Simon's mother-in-law. In compassionate service she ministered to Jesus and his disciples. In compassionate service Jesus cured and healed what appeared to be an entire city of sick and hurting people. In compassionate service he goes out to a deserted place to pray and take care of himself so that he could continue to do the work he was called to do.

More than anything else this passage informs us that to follow Jesus is to practice compassion toward all people and to ourselves.

So here's a little exercise for us to engage that will move us closer to being followers of Jesus.

Instead of recognizing the differences between yourself and others, try to recognize what you have in common. At the root of it all, we are all human beings who are created in God's image. That's a foundational message of the Gospel.

We have all have people in our lives whom we don't care much for, or who get on our last good nerve, or for whom we experience the malaise of the 21st century called "compassion fatigue."

When you encounter these people remember this truth. We all need food, and shelter, and love. We all crave attention, and recognition, and affection, and above all, we all

desire happiness. Reflect on these commonalities you have with every other human being, and practice ignoring the differences. Say in your mind, "Just like me, this person is seeking happiness in his/her life." "Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life." "Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness and despair." "Just like me, this person is seeking to fill his/her needs." "Just like me, this person is learning about life." And then remember that by following Jesus in compassionate service you can love that person and make their lives more healed than they were before.

It may be that *just practicing this compassionate approach of Jesus* with others is all the healing they – and you – need to change your lives and build God's Kingdom, which is exactly what Jesus calls us to do: to follow him.

Amen.