

On the Road with Jesus

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Mark 1:29-39

Do you recall this story told by Fred Craddock? I've shared it with you before. "I once was asked to speak in Las Vegas at a church convention of a major denomination. I left my hotel and caught a cab to go out to the convention center where the gathering was being held. I got in the cab and told the driver where I was going. He said, 'Is that where all those preachers and folks are gathering?' I said, 'Yes.'

"He said, 'Well, I want to tell you, don't try to convert me. I'm Roman Catholic. I go to mass. My wife goes to mass. Our kids go to mass. We are a Catholic family. We're Christians. So if you want to convert someone, get another cab!'

"I said, 'I just want a ride out to the convention center.'

"The driver responded, 'I had four people try to convert me this morning and I'm tired of it!'"

I suspect we would all be tired of it. And perhaps it is that image, that fear, of in-your-face, aggressive evangelism that makes folks like us in churches like this so reluctant to share our faith. We certainly don't want to offend anyone in the name of Jesus. Maybe it's more prudent just to remain silent.

Just last Tuesday, I was getting our grandson's bicycle out of the garage. He has just learned how to ride a two-wheeler and right now is excited to ride all the time. I have pictures! I looked up and there was a clean-cut young man in dark slacks, white shirt, dark tie with a backpack. Sound familiar . . . clearly an intense, well-meaning young man on his Mormon mission. I've seen them before and they are always very polite and usually leave quickly when I tell them my family is active in a local church. But not this one. He kept wanting to quote the Bible, get me to read some tract. He had his little speech and, dam it, he was going to give it, even after my wife came out and informed him I was a minister. Rather than engaging him any more, I simply turned, walked back into the garage and closed the door. One of the more aggressive young Mormons I have seen in our neighborhood. And again, it's that rather self-righteous, "I have the truth you need, and who cares if you already attend a church" attitude that turns so many of us off when it comes to sharing faith.

But, staying with the Mormon theme for a moment longer, I have always liked this story, again told by Fred Craddock: "I recall when I was serving a parish in mid-Tennessee. On a rainy day, I would go over to the church, to my study, and I would say to myself, 'It's too bad it's raining. If it weren't raining, I would go to the nursing home, go to the hospital, maybe call on a few of the church members. But since it's raining, I think I'll just kick back with a good book.' I'd pull a book off the shelf, get in a comfortable chair, and lean back. And just as I did, I saw out the window, through the rain, those two Mormon missionaries. I said, 'Why don't you guys give me a break? It's raining!' Their zeal ruined my day." Well, I'm quite sure that a number of us here are zealous about our faith, zealous about our church. But how do we share it?

There are a number of things in our text for today that could be the foundation for a sermon: the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, her willingness to serve as soon as she gets out of her sick bed – a lot of women preachers seem to like that one. . . one moment she's flat on her back with illness, the next she is serving the men – what else is new?

There is the crowd coming to Jesus for healing, there is Jesus leaving the crowd behind to find a few quiet moments for prayer. And then, before the crowds can get close to him, he abruptly leaves. There is a lot going on in just a few verses. But that is exactly what leaps out at me – there is so much happening and it is happening so fast. These texts are the Gospel at warp speed. Someone has hit the fast forward button. We see a Jesus who is hard to keep up with, who cannot be pinned down. We may come to the Gospel hoping for predictability, order and control. What we find are surprise, mystery and wonder, and, again, a mercurial Jesus who cannot be captured and controlled. Clearly his intention is to move on, to preach and spread his ministry to all of Galilee. He seems to

have this sense of urgency, seems almost driven to move on to other places, to speak the word God sent him to speak, to teach and heal and share the good news God sent him to share.

I watch all his activity and I wonder...how about us? Do we have any urgency about our faith, about our God, about this church and its many ministries? Do we know anyone for whom this church might be a blessing, indeed who may be a blessing to this church? I think of one of Thomas Hardy's characters, Farmer Oak. Perhaps there is a little Farmer Oak in each of us. Every morning and evening Farmer Oak stood at his window and watched a young woman go by on her way to milk the cows. Each day he watched her go by with her milk pails empty and full. Eventually he fell in love with her there, behind the glass, safely in his house, looking out the window. But she never knew because he was afraid. He had so much to share with her, but she never knew. So again, I wonder...could the same be said of us when it comes to reaching out to others? We have so much to share about this church, but unless we make the effort, take the risk, unless we make the decision not to remain safely behind the sanctuary windows, no one will ever know.

I have a book, *Unbinding the Gospel*, by Martha Reese. She studied 150 churches and interviewed more than two thousand people in a study of growing churches. She looked at two basic questions: why do people first visit a church and what brings them back a second or third or fourth time? Regarding why people first join a church, almost 60% of new church members answered that they first visited the church they eventually joined because somebody invited them or they already knew somebody in the church. Person to person contact, an invitation, a friendly word, are far more important than clever advertising, events or even a pastor's column in the local newspaper.

Concerning the second question, why people came back, Reese discovered that 68% of people who joined a church said they returned after their initial visit because of the warmth, the love, the realness of the church members they met and talked to. The percentage who returned because of the pastor?...14%. Concludes Reese, "So, an invitation seems to get these visitors there in the first place, but the welcome, warmth and authenticity of people, followed by the personality, teaching and preaching of the pastor and worship bring people back to experience church life again." Clearly, as far as the world is concerned, we are the church; wherever we go, there goes the church of Jesus Christ.

A pastor shares this story: "I know from experience that people's defensiveness about religion can be tough. I once made a pastoral visit, but apparently no one was home. I knew a family had recently moved into that house, but when I knocked there was no answer. I went back the next day and a little girl came to the door. I said, 'Hi,' and she said, 'Hi.' Then her mother came to the door. I introduced myself and she invited me in. When I sat down, the little girl said, 'I saw you here yesterday, but my mother hid in the closet.' We managed to get over that awkward moment, but I knew how the mother felt. When you talk to people about faith and church, you do not want to make religion intrusive."

Again, that may be what we fear...sounding intrusive. But, if you have a doctor or a book or a favorite restaurant that you are excited about, aren't you often anxious to share that information with a friend or neighbor. If you have a church you are excited about...A friendly, non-threatening, no strings attached invitation can always be issued. And if an invitation to worship seems too threatening, how about to an event – church picnic, pasta luncheon, a retreat, or one of the programs we host with Copperfield's?

I almost feel like I should apologize for this sermon today, at least to visitors. This is not an issue I talk about very often. I guess I'll have to blame Jesus...out there, teaching and healing and caring, filled with passion for the Gospel and for his God. Jesus, out there, moving quickly, knowing he has something important, transformative, to share, Jesus infusing life where there was death, light where darkness, hope where despair. Jesus, calling us to join him in living out the good news as best we can and inviting others to share in a spirit-filled fellowship. Yes, I'll blame him.

As one colleague has said, "It would be one thing for Jesus to say, 'I am able to bring healing and comfort, hope and wholeness to people.' But Jesus doesn't stop at that. He also says, in effect, 'I will enable you – us! – to bring healing and comfort, hope and wholeness, to people.'" And, wonder of wonders, it can begin, it can happen, with just a simple invitation.