

Sermon for Sunday, February 11, 2024

Mark 8: 7-9:8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Since early January we have been moving through the church season of Epiphany. What does the word epiphany mean? An epiphany is an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure and this word is often used with an appearance or manifestation of a divine being. That's the dictionary definition. As followers of Jesus we think about it in relationship to how Jesus as the Son of God is revealed to us.

While many times an epiphany is thought to be a "light bulb moment" or something that happens quickly, it can also be a gradual learning or understanding. That's what we have been exposed to over the last few weeks. We have been reading from the early chapters of the gospel of Mark for the last six weeks and from those chapters we are told stories from the life of Jesus. These stories demonstrate his identity and power as God. For most of us it has been a gradual epiphany.

We have been witness to

- Healing the sick
- Calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee
- Casting out a legion of demons from a man possessed
- Raising a twelve year old girl from the dead

All of these stories give us glimpses (or provide us with anecdotes) that support the premise that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the one with power over the forces of nature, whether it be creation or disease or death.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday—the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. Today we accompany three disciples to the top of a mountain and are witness to one last event: a moment Jesus is revealed as the Beloved Son of God. In this scene God speaks and tells the disciples, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" If the disciples needed any more words of affirmation that Jesus was from God, these words provide are it.

In this moment, up on a mountain, with only a few witnesses, Jesus' identity is revealed. He is seen in all of his heavenly glory; shining like the sun. There's also a supporting cast: Moses—

representing the law of the Old Testament and Elijah—representing the Old Testament prophets. Today is the culmination of the learning work of epiphany; the closing argument, the last lecture.

You may not have noticed but the gospel of Mark is just 16 chapters long and today's reading begins at the end of chapter 8. We are about half way through. Every author has a master plan in creating their work. The gospel writer Mark has crafted his "argument" that Jesus is the Son of God by culminating in the Transfiguration of Jesus.

From this point in the story Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. There will still be more teaching. There will still be more healing. But Jesus has begun predicting his crucifixion and death. The ever intensifying face-offs with the religious authorities who question everything that Jesus does and says will continue. Why? Because change is hard. And when as an authority, you have what is considered to be a superior status, when people defer to your knowledge and wisdom, you don't want to lose it or give it up. Power is addicting.

Jesus challenged the authorities of the day. He spent much of his time with the outcasts, the sick, and those who had been judged sinners. Jesus was down in the trenches with the people who had no power and no status. Jesus knew the trials and tribulations of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the refugees. He taught in a way that reoriented the mindset of his listeners toward a new way of living.

This new way of living was a way of love; a way of kindness and compassion; a way that intended that the poor and the sick and the lonely should have hope. The poor would have food. The sick would be cared for and maybe even healed, the lonely would have companions. The needs of these folks would be supplied. The emptiness of these folks would be filled: and this filling would come about through kindness, through compassion, and through love.

It would also come about through the changing of people's hearts and minds in a manner that would cause them to see the needs of the people around them. It would cause their minds to be changed in a way that inspired them to action with love, compassion, and kindness toward those with need.

The very first words of Jesus recorded in this gospel are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The next 8 chapters (that we have been

reading from since Christmas) show what the kingdom of God actually looks like; what it should look like here on earth.

And by the way, that word *repent* often makes people uncomfortable because it seems to be pointing at them and at their sinfulness and insisting upon change. Well, one way to think about sin and sinfulness is to look at the vowel in the center of the word. It is the letter "I". Sin is pretty much always about emphasizing your own needs over the needs of the many people around you. Repentance is opening your mind toward the needs of the people around you. It means acting with love, compassion, and kindness as you stop worrying about yourself and your needs and start focusing on the needs of others.

One example that many of us have experience with is the birth of a new baby; especially the first child. Women who have become mothers know what this is like. Suddenly their focus changes such that it's all about the needs of that brand new life. Their life will never be the same. They experience an opening up of their mind and heart into a new way.

One could argue that it's the same for us when we determine that we are going to strive to follow Jesus. Our life changes. We are, in effect, taking up a cross. We are opening up our lives to new possibilities; possibilities that diminish our importance and prominence in the world and point, as much as possible, toward Jesus.

The lives that Jesus touched in the stories from these last few weeks were most certainly changed for the better. The suffering of the world was lessened. But Jesus' work didn't dispel all of the sickness and sorrow that existed in the world. There remained many other sick and distressed people. He left a certain amount of work for us to do. It can be argued that it was his expectation that we would continue to maintain an outward focus; not on ourselves but on those in need around us. That he expected that we would act with love, compassion and kindness toward those in need around us just as he did.

Remember the starfish on the beach? There was a storm and thousands of starfish were washed up on a beach. A man who was walking along this beach watched a little boy throwing starfish back into the ocean. He asked the little boy why since there were so many and the child couldn't possibly save them all. The boy reached down, picked up another one and threw it into the sea. Then he responded, "Well, I made a difference for that one!"

Yes, the needs of the world are very, very great. We won't be able to solve all of them. But we most certainly can "make a difference for that one!" If we can act with love, compassion, and kindness toward even just one other person, we have "made a difference for that one!" That's God's expectation for his followers: for us. Not that we will solve all the problems of the world, but that we might "make a difference for that one!" Amen.