

Annual Meeting Sermon
Fr. Christopher McLaren
Sunday January 30, 2022
Text: Luke 4:21-30
Theme: Loved by God – Sent to Others

Recently a parishioner told me that they attended St. Mark's because it was a church that didn't make them angry every Sunday. I knew exactly what they were talking about as I'd had a similar experience before finding my way into the Episcopal Church. In one way or another, many of us are at St. Mark's because we found our people or we found a way of worship that opens us up to faith up instead of closing us down. Many among us are in recovery from an experience of religion that we found wounding or rejecting of who we are or of who our friends and family members are. You may be able to add your own reasons for why a particular church or tradition made you angry each Sunday and I'd be interested to hear about your experience. One of my assumptions is that you are here each week because you are finding food for your soul and that after the liturgy you don't have to tell your children, "Now I know that the preacher said this in his sermon today but we don't believe that in our house." What happens here each week is meant to remind each of us of the "Good News of God in Christ," that we are loved, that we matter, that forgiveness is possible, that compassion is the best way, that Jesus' Way of Love is what it's all about. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is fond of saying if it isn't a loving, life-giving and liberating message it isn't of God. It doesn't mean that we won't disappoint you sometimes, and if we haven't managed to disappoint you or fail you in some way, please give us at least another ½ hour or so. This is a human place, run by humans, attended by humans and therefore imperfect but it also a place that is doing its best through our gathered community to make something beautiful for God in this place and we are glad that you are here to be a part of this adventure in faith.

I am not saying that you will not be challenged or made uncomfortable here at St. Mark's. Recently Lillian Daniel, one of our Animate: Faith speakers, described why being part of a tradition that is bigger than anything we can do for ourselves, like the Episcopal/Anglican Christian tradition, is important because it can act like sandpaper rubbing against the conventional wisdom of our culture and the status quo that surrounds us. Faith is not meant to make us angry but it can certainly make us uncomfortable, open our hearts and minds and hopefully shift our consciousness as we grow in understanding. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "That the gospel of Christ was meant to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

In another of our recent Inquirers' sessions we watched a segment on Jesus from the Animate: Faith series. In it, the pastor Mark Skandrette shared a story of a time early in his ministry when one Sunday he was preaching from the pulpit and as he looked out at the congregation, he saw people falling asleep and fidgeting in their seats anxious to get home to watch the game or to get to the restaurant ahead of the noon-day rush. He knew that no matter what he said people would come though the line after the service and dutifully shake his hand and say good

message pastor or maybe make a comment about a funny story he'd told. The possibility that he might spend a life-time re-enacting this scene every Sunday for the rest of his life made him want to scream, "Is anybody listening out there, this should really make a difference about how we live our lives?" This led him to some soul-searching work of really thinking about what church was supposed to do, why people were there and what difference what we do on a Sunday morning really makes. I'm pretty sure that this is not what we are here to do, to punch the clock, do our time or take a nap. We want church matter! We want it to be a place of nurture, beauty, significant relationships, active learning, inner-change, challenge and action, and sermons that don't put us to sleep. Once again hopefully you've found your people and you are becoming a part of making these things true. Because of course The Church, this church is not just the Sunday sermon or whatever the clergy have dreamed up, it is the living breathing reality of the people of God making something beautiful for God together here in this place and beyond this place in response to the love of Christ that has been poured into our lives and the Grace of God that surrounds us on every side and the Power of the Spirit that is active in every person of faith. Church is not a spectator sport. It's not a sacramental vending machine. It is a communal endeavor made more meaningful and beautiful by your contribution as God's person in the world.

The gospel lesson today is about a sermon that Jesus gives early in his ministry. He's a local boy who's come home to his hometown synagogue and when it comes time in the worship for the reading, Jesus stands up and is handed the scroll of Isaiah. He reads from the scroll.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The congregation marvels that Jesus reads the Good News so well, the announcement of the day of God's favor – release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, good news for the poor. They have a warm feeling of being reminded about how special they are and how incredible their relationship with God is. But then Jesus begins to preach and that is when the trouble starts. Jesus' words become a bit uncomfortable for people, even shocking and upsetting. It's not that Jesus is saying something that is untrue, it's just that he is reminding them of things that they would rather not think about, rather not hear, things that don't match their conventional wisdom about God and how God acts.

Jesus reminds the congregation that When God came among them before, in the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God dared to do good works among the Gentiles. God worked among despised outsiders—a pagan woman and a pagan army officer. That's when the good news sounded bad.

These words of Jesus in the synagogue made the people so angry that they wanted to kill him. In fact, they get up and try to silence the preacher for good. Thankfully this has never happened here and I might actually vote for napping over violence.

Jesus was speaking to a group of religious insiders and he dared to tell them something that did not validate their exclusive status as God's chosen people. He lifted up a minority report from a history they all knew and rehearsed selectively. He pointed out that God was guilty of coloring outside of the lines. He blessed people who weren't part of the tradition, who were outsiders and not Jews. He dared to point out that God had a way of expanding the circle of love of helping, even saving people who were not card-carrying members or had not transferred their letter from their last parish. God didn't really care about the ridiculous rules of inside and outside that people like to create. Jesus' sermon failed not because he was wrong about God but because he dared to point out where the religious folks, the jaded insiders, had room to grow. What Jesus dared to point out was that God's love does not respect our human-made boundaries.

Jesus reminds the Nazarenes of an unpopular strand of Jewish Tradition. They were not chosen by God to form a closed society and become the beneficiaries of divine blessings and abundance. They were chosen to bring the benefits of one God to all people. The focus is not on themselves but on what they can do for others. (Shea) what is needed is a consciousness shift "To be loved means to be sent to others."

So, on this annual meeting Sunday, this is a very subversive text to read. I don't imagine that this reading makes us angry today but I hope it invites us to think about how God might want to color outside the lines in and through our community. How can we understand ourselves as a community with a message for those who are not yet here but who God is calling into a loving, live-giving and liberating relationship? How can we realize more deeply that the blessings we have are meant to be shared; that St. Mark's is blessed to be a blessing?

What is it that we want to share with others? What is it that we have that might really matter to others?

Rooted in Tradition

First, we are a church that is grounded in tradition, a rich Christian tradition, the beauty of the Anglican Church and the depth of the Book of Common Prayer. We love the liturgy and we want to be nurtured by robust and powerful worship. This is at the center of everything we do and it is one way to reach out to people who arrive at our doors. We embrace our tradition, sing beautiful hymns with deep theology and we learn new music that trains our hearts in new ways. We want worship that is distinguished by a casual elegance not stuffy or uptight, not boring but beautiful, not aloof but connective. We want to be part of a liturgy that is sensitive to the needs of our world and congregation, playful, intense, and intimate. It's a lot to ask of ourselves and sometimes we fail, but that is what we desire.

Belonging

We want people to know that they can belong before they believe. You don't have to have it all together to be part of this faith community. "You can come as you are," to quote the Nirvana song that is printed on our corner sign. We want you to know that we are glad that you are here and that we've been awaiting your arrival. God has drawn you here for a reason. You matter. God is inviting you into the adventure of faith and wants you to grow in ever deepening relationship with the living God. That is what we are here to do and that is how we help each other, by sharing the love, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness of God with one another. We want people to know that their questions are welcome. We don't pretend to have all the answers but we do believe that we are here to be drawn more deeply into the adventure of faith. And that you don't have to check your brain at the door. Knowing God is not just a matter of the heart it's also a matter for the mind and we reject any idea that divorces one from the other. At the same time, we aren't just making this up as we go along. We are a storied people who are part of a beautiful and demanding way of life that is centuries deep and continents wide. We have inherited a faith that has stood the test of time and has much to teach us. It's not a dead and stagnant set of beliefs but neither is it anything goes. It's a faith, based in the love of God poured into the world in the person of Jesus and the peculiar and transformative way of life he demonstrated. It's a way of life that continues to inspire people to live lives that are demanding and joyful at the same time, full of grace and generous in giving of themselves, honest about their failings and open to growing more and more into God's beloved person in the world.

Participation

We want you to participate in the life of the community and in our shared work. We believe that everyone is called to serve Christ in the world and in the midst of the community. Each of us have gifts and abilities to offer. This is not a consumerist church; we're not selling something. What happens here at St. Mark's is what we do together. The liturgy is understood as the work of the people, worship is our work, what we offer to God together. The important question is not, is this church meeting my needs but rather, "How is it that my participation in the Church is changing my needs?" God is calling you to offer you gifts to contribute to the life of this faith community and it's work in the world. We want to be part of church that honors the generations and loves to see kids and the elderly in leadership and service. You don't have to get involved right away, we realize that sometimes people need space to land and acclimate and feel comfortable and we also believe that if you are open to the urging of the Spirit, you will find a place to serve, a way to give something of what you have received and a place where you can grow.

A Relational Church

We are deeply committed to being a relational church where people are more valuable than programs. We understand church as a thick network of relationships that matter. We want to be a church, not of anonymous worshipers, but of people who work to know each other and be known and thus can care and love and help one another to discover our beloved-ness in God.

People talk a lot about the loss of community or loneliness in our culture and I know that this is the reality for so many. St. Mark's offers each of us an opportunity to create community that we all desire. But community is not something that just happens. It takes effort. It is not something that can be purchased, it something that we actually form together through our 10,000 acts of kindness, our conversations at coffee hour, our interactions in formation classes, our one-on-one relational meetings, the meal dropped off on the porch, the visit to the hospital, the phone call to someone you are concerned about. We are made for community. People thrive when they are loved and supported, find acceptance, companionship and compassion, as well as accountability, challenge and learning. Community is a place where people of all ages are respected and enjoyed and honored, a place where people pull together with their energy, skills, and financial resources to make community possible, sustainable and capable of reaching out beyond itself.

Beauty

We desire for St. Mark's to be a place of beauty. There are many different kinds of beauty we enjoy as a community. We're grateful for the beauty of music from our choir and Organist and for the music the congregation makes together. We want to deepen this beauty, take good care of the pipe organ (which will require some real investment in the coming years), acquire a quality piano and develop a music program that will draw people into this community. This past year we celebrated the completion of our Cosmic Mosaic that graces both our Montessori School and our Church. Its beauty is not just in its stunning placement tile and its sparkle but in the collaboration and perseverance between school and church that made it possible in the most difficult of times. We want to continue to embrace the beauty of including children and youth in our worship and to encourage them in their participation and leadership so that the church belongs to them now not just in some distant future.

Reaching out in Love

We want to be a church that is reaching out in love. To be loved by God means to be sent to others. There are many ways that our community is already reaching out in love to others and I was really happy to see the video testimonies that Mother Sylvia put together about two parishioners and their outreach to the community. I also know that our community is incredible at reaching out to our own members when they are going through difficult times. This year we will continue to work on getting more involved with ABQ FaithWorks and our own Diocesan Borderland Ministries in areas of support for asylum seeking families and for those experiencing homelessness. We have strong connections with this ministry and will be working to find more ways to get involved. Together as a community we can reach out in love, we can become active participants in the ways of Jesus. We know is that the needs of the world are big but that we can begin to help one step at a time and in doing so discover that not only do we have more capacity to serve than we thought but that God is changing us from the inside out in the midst of our caring action.

I'm not interested in delivering a sermon that people get angry about or that people want to kill me for delivering and I think I may have seen someone taking a nap. So, I'm going to draw this sermon effort to a close. I love being a part of the Community of St. Mark's. I feel blessed by

the loving care shown to Maren and I and our kids (not kids anymore) over the past 10 years of ministry and I am looking forward to many years of adventures in faith ahead. I am very thankful for our talented and hard-working Sr. Warden Lucy Sinkular and the support and partnership she offers me each week as your rector and her leadership of the vestry and it's work.

St. Mark's is truly blessed and I'm grateful for that. But this sermon has one real point and that is that we are blessed not to congratulate ourselves but to be a blessing to others. To be loved by God is to be sent to others. May it be so.