

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday January 27, 2019 Annual Meeting  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Text: Luke 4: 14-21  
Title: Expanding the Circle of God's Love

Jesus is a local boy back at his childhood place of worship and he is chosen as the lector for the day. He is handed a scroll in the synagogue on the Sabbath and he stands up to read much like we have just done in the liturgy of the word. The reading Jesus chooses is a powerful one from the scroll of Isaiah that speaks of the coming reign of God, a reality that is seen in the way the most vulnerable in any society are treated. In Isaiah's vision the poor finally get the good news they've been hoping for, the captives are released from their prisons, those who have been lost in darkness finally see the light and find their way again, and the oppressed are given a new lease on life.

All of it is encapsulated in the idea of Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor. A year when things that had been becoming terribly inequitable are made right, crippling debts are canceled, land that has been lost to a family system is returned, the whole community is rebalanced with an eye toward justice and fair treatment of others. The scriptures contain the prophetic understanding that, left to ourselves things become inequitable, skewed and burdensome. The rich almost always get richer, and once they get in control of the economic systems, they are unlikely to rebalance things unless there is a deeper community. It is important to understand that every so often things need to be reset, and people who have made a hundred bad choices still need a fresh start a change to try again. The year of Jubilee was a powerful notion contained in the Jewish worldview, because it reminded everyone that God was a God of second changes, God loved the underdog, cheered for the losers, and knew what it meant to need a little cosmic rebalancing of the scales of success. Even though the prophet Jeremiah says that Israel never followed the scriptural wisdom of Jubilee it remained a powerful vision of God's desire for his creation.

Jesus selects this powerful and obviously political reading as a way of telling the people who he is. In a real way this is Jesus' "Inaugural Address." Jesus is saying, if you want to know who I am, listen to this reading from your own spiritual tradition, that is what I stand for this is what my life is going to be about, this is how I will shape my ministry. From the very beginning Jesus connects the spiritual life of the synagogue and the individual to a social gospel that is extremely challenging and unsettling then and now.

At the conclusion of Jesus' reading in the synagogue he looks at the anxious congregation and tells them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus proclaims that God is at work right here and now. It is a powerful claim. We are tempted to take words like Isaiah's and see them as something deferred, as something that we hope will happen sometime in the future. But Jesus tells them that the God of Isaiah is at work here and now. That even as these scriptures are read God is acting to make them a reality. In essence he tells them to open their eyes and see that God is at work in their very midst. Those listening try to soften the message by reminding each other that this is just a local boy, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" "What are his credentials to tell us what to do?" "Where did he get his theological degree?" Jesus' response is not polite or deferential. He goes hard at them. He quotes a Jewish proverb about prophets being without honor in their hometown that does not endear him to the congregation. And then he really turns up the heat by reminding them that God's understanding of community is larger than theirs. That God colors outside the lines.

If we were to read the next few verses Jesus offends them by telling them two stories about how God chose to minister and heal strangers outside of Israel instead of their own people. First, he recounts how Elijah the prophet was sent to Zarephath the widow in Sidon during the famine even though there were plenty of widows in need in Israel. And then he recounts how Elisha heals the leper Naaman, a Syrian officer in the army of Israel's enemy. It was not that Jesus was telling them anything new. He was simply reminding them of their own sacred stories hidden in plain view within their scriptures. But in pointing them out, in reminding them of the wideness of God's mercy something narrowed inside of them. They did not like a view of the scriptures that widened the circle of God's love and redemption, they preferred a view of scripture that preserved their special status and shut out certain people from God's grace. And the minute they realized the Jesus was about opening the circle, about demonstrating the wideness of God's love and mercy in the world, they closed ranks on Jesus. He was no longer the favorite local son, he was a dangerous stranger and they wanted to end his life and ministry before it began.

It is an interesting story to read and reflect upon as a community on this day of our annual meeting. Jesus is reminding us that God is at work in the world. He reminds us that within our very own treasured scriptures there are troubling stories that constantly challenge the way we think and act and question the status quo we are all so tempted to protect and defend. Jesus' first sermon was a sermon meant to remind anyone who hears it that the people of God are always in need of a fresh vision of God at work in unexpected ways.

One of the key elements in this passage is Jesus' proclamation of God being at work here and now. One interesting thing to do at annual meeting would be to have people stand up and tell us how God has been at work their lives. Or turn and talk to one another about what God has been doing in your life this past year. (I see some people edging toward the back doors). Listening to the stories of people within our community is a powerful way to understand how important St. Mark's is in people's lives and where God is at work. So, while I don't plan to make you turn to and talk to

your pew neighbor today, I will challenge you to have those kinds of conversations in the weeks and months ahead.

I want to spend the rest of this sermon reflecting about the Core Values of St. Mark's and telling some short stories along the way.

### **Welcome and Hospitality**

One of the things I hear often when people decide to make St. Mark's their spiritual home is that it was one of the warmest and most welcoming church's they visited when they are church shopping. That is a blessing to be sure and this faith community is warm and welcoming to many. But we cannot assume that it will always be so or that everyone has this experience. It takes real attention and real work each week to look at those around you and take the risk to meet people whom you do not know. It takes discipline not to spend your entire time at church talking only to people you know. If we want to be a welcoming congregation, we have to practice the disciplines that make a church welcoming. Introduce yourself to people you don't know. Don't say, "Are you new here?" don't try to make them feel like they don't belong. Just say, "hi, I'm Christopher and I don't know you." Take the time to get to know them and then do one more thing, introduce them to someone you already know.

As many of you know, one of the core practices of St. Mark' is having intentional one-on-one conversations. This past summer we worked with a large group of people, learning the art of conversation and listening and encouraging one another to work over the summer at meeting people we didn't know. The result was over 250 conversations that would have never happened if we hadn't worked at it and saw within it the life-giving connections that it would bring to this faith community. These conversations were simply that, getting to know each other they weren't recruiting or asking for money or anything like that. They were an effort to welcome people into a deeper sense of community, on in which a thick network or relationships is lovingly cultivated and cared for. At St. Mark's we consider one-on-one conversations to be an ongoing spiritual practice that builds relationships that enrich our communal life and encourage us in our faith. One of our summer of conversation participants described her experience in words something like this, "After having deep conversations with many people from this parish, I feel a new kind of connection here, a kind of responsibility that comes with being a part of something and being there for others."

Listening to one another, especially for where God is at work in the life of another, is not only a deep privilege but a spiritual art and practice. Truly listening to one another is one of the most radical things that we can do as a community and St. Mark's is blessed to have this practice as part of our life together.

### **Worship**

Worship is at the heart of everything we do as a people of God at St. Mark's.

Each week we gather as a people of faith to give thanks for the many gifts of God in our lives, and to offer up the fragments of our lives to a loving God who is able to heal and make us whole. Placing the practice of worship at the center means that nurturing our souls through scripture, music, fellowship, Eucharist, prayer and silence are essential to becoming God's people.

Just a few weeks ago we had the joyous opportunity of welcoming 5 young persons into the Christian faith and life through baptism. This past year we have offered times of prayer and silence when our country was experiencing terrible tragedies, offering the beautiful service of evening prayer as a way to shape our grief and pain.

Thankfully we've seen our Thursday Eucharist begin to attract a new congregation during the week at 11am. Offering yet another time to give thanks and to offer our prayers as we are nurtured around the table of Christ's self-giving love.

Together we make our worship and I am so thankful for the many people who shape and serve in our liturgy: our growing choir and Kathie MacDonald-Vargo organist and choir director, all the Servants of Worship from altar guild and acolytes and vergers to ushers and chalice bearers and bread bakers, and our children's and youth choirs that lead us into worship. I want to remind people that worship is something we do together, it invites participation. So, pick up the hymnal and try to sing with the community, if you won't sing at least follow the words. Allow there to be quiet in this place prior to the liturgy beginning so people can center and pray and meditate.

Together we offer something beautiful to God in this place and open ourselves up to receive the nourishing life of God into our inner lives.

### **Nurture**

At St. Mark's we believe in a living and vital faith. As a community we value spiritual nurture not only for our children and youth but for adults too. I am so grateful for the many people who care for the spiritual lives of our children, who engage our young people with the sacred stories of our faith and become spiritual friends, guides and advocates along the way.

It was three years ago this January that we began having multiple small group study and discussion groups. It was a sea shift around here driven by our listening to young adults about their interest and how they desired more intimate settings for learning and growing spiritually. Since then we have enjoyed a surprising variety of offerings: Conversations on Race, Hildegard of Bingen, Biblical Greek, The Lord's Prayer, Parables of Jesus, Our Biblical Ancestry 101, Christianity and the Survival of Creation, Falling Upward, TED talk theology, Worldwide Islam and Interfaith Dialogue, Praying with Icons, Julian of Norwich, Prayer book Spirituality, Pastoral Care and Trauma, and End of life planning to name just a few. St. Mark's strives to be a learning community and we depend upon our members to bring forth ideas, facilitate classes and offer opportunities. Do you have an idea for a course? Would

you like to teach about something? Is there a book that was important for your spiritual growth and you'd like others to share it?

### **Service**

St. Mark's has been involved in feeding the hungry for many years and we continue to be through Hope Works, formerly known as St. Martin's. A significant group of parishioners donate food, create breakfast casseroles and serve an early morning breakfast several times each year. This ministry is well supported, open to new participants and in the midst of reorganizing its leadership team so there are lots of opportunities to help.

There is a growing interest in being involved with Immigrants and refugee ministry here in Albuquerque through the Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice especially as our own country's administration tries to make it more difficult for the most vulnerable in our world. As the people of God it is part of our call to welcome the stranger and sojourner in our land and to reach out in love to those who are the most vulnerable among us just as Jesus modeled in his life and ministry.

Our Montessori school is another place of amazing outreach to young children and families as we help to create and nurture an environment where young children can flourish and grow with the life and learning skills that each one of them needs to become fully alive human beings.

I'm also very grateful for those in our congregation who take communion to many of our members who can no longer make it to church physically but remain a real part of our congregation. What a blessing it is to have the privilege of bringing the sacrament to our extended family in faith each week.

The scroll of Isaiah that Jesus chose to read makes clear that our spiritual lives are not simply private but draw us into ministry in the world. We believe that out of the heart of worship the desire to serve is kindled.

### **Giving**

Another core practices at St. Mark's is giving. We believe that God is the giver of all good gifts and our heartfelt response to this is gratitude and generosity. To this end we encourage each other to be people who practice generosity. I'm constantly amazed at the generosity of this faith community and believe me I'm willing to be amazed on any given day and at any given moment.

This year our stewardship team set an ambitious goal to fully fund our ministry and see it expand. The giving has been strong this year and we are only a few thousand dollars short of our goal for 2019. The truth is that we need the generous help of every household that calls St. Mark's their spiritual home. Your generosity is what will shape St. Mark's future as a faith community as we continue to expand the circle of God's love in this neighborhood and city. Giving is spiritually important. We believe that in generously sharing our lives, our time, our resources and our service

we grow into an ever deepening and loving relationship with God. If you have not made a pledge in support of the work of God in this place, I encourage you to do that today. If you are unsure make a small pledge per/month something you know you can do 5 or 20 dollars and then allow that generosity to grow into something beautiful for God.

These five core practices of Welcome, Worship, Nurture, Service and Giving are touchstones for our life together here at St. Mark's. They are practices that we continue to work on together, practices that feed our souls and stretch us to become the deep people of God that this world so desperately needs. There are of course many more things that could be said on this Sunday morning and I hope that you will stay for the annual meeting to hear more about what is happening in this faith community and how God is at work stretching us and challenging our understanding of community.

### **Fun**

I would like to conclude with one last core practice that is essential to the vitality of St. Mark's, fun. I believe that this is a community that knows how to have fun together, can throw a good party, can dance and laugh late into the night, can easily find things to celebrate and invite others into the joy of life with God and sacred rhythm of fast and feast. Over the past year I've had many people tell me how wonderful it is that St. Mark's is a place of celebration and fun, they this was not their experience of church growing up. Comments like these make me smile and remind me that there is something wonderful about St. Mark's. We are a joyful people and I'm so grateful to be a part of it all with you. The priest who sponsored me for ordination was fond of telling me, "Christopher have enough Christianity to make you truly joyful and not just enough to make you miserable." That wisdom has always stayed with me and I'm grateful to have found a place to live it out among you.

I am grateful to be among you as your pastor and priest and to be on the journey of faith alongside each of you. It is a privilege to share your joys and sorrows and your surprising willingness to change and grow as a people of God. What a gift it is to be part of a community open to new possibilities of being church and to trust that God has placed us in this neighborhood for a purpose. What we are making in this place is something that no amount of money can purchase, it is simply something that is not for sale anywhere for it must be lovingly made through relationships developed over time. I'm speaking of the gift of community, the depth of relationships, the compassionate care for one another and the willingness to honor each other's faith journey and struggles along the way. These are gifts that one cannot put a price tag on because they are the gifts that come from God being at work in our midst. Together we are making something beautiful for God in this place. Today the words that Jesus read long ago are being fulfilled in and through us. May we continue to have enough Christianity to make us joyful in this place together as a people of God as the circle of Christ's community expands in our midst.