

Mark 1:29-39

February 8, 2009

South Plains

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A Model for Ministry

Two weeks ago I opened up my email to find an announcement about two Presbyterians visiting from Congo. Because I had visited the same region of Africa myself twenty years ago, I responded and asked for their itinerary. Thanks to the Presbyterian network, this week I got a phone call from an old friend in eastern Virginia, a Congolese layperson, whom was our neighbor for a year. At that time I was living in Portsmouth, Virginia, a city with a little over 100,000 people. We had three hospitals in Portsmouth and hundreds of physicians. I learned that in contrast to our abundant medical care, that small clinic in Kinshasa, Congo provided the only care for 100,000 people in their part of the city. Every day Congolese lined up at the door of the clinic just as the sick people of Capernaum lined up at the door of Simon and Andrew's home hoping that Jesus would cure them of their diseases and demons. When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life," he means abundant life that started on this street in Capernaum.

As you probably know, medical care, education and evangelism have been the three pillars of Presbyterian mission work around the world. Seeing how desperately the people needed the medicines and care offered by a simple clinic helped me to realize that Jesus himself has provided the model for the core ministries of

his followers for the last two thousand years. In the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel, we meet Jesus doing the things that characterized his ministry throughout his earthly life; and they are the same things that should characterize our ministry in his name.

The first time we see Jesus he is proclaiming the good news of God, calling followers, and teaching in the synagogue of Capernaum. When he preached to the Capernaum people, their mouths fell open in amazement because this blue-collar rabbi taught with authority. When a demon-possessed man interrupted his message, he told the demon to shut up. The demon obeyed and the congregation was overwhelmed. After worship, Jesus leaves the synagogue and immediately (one of Mark's favorite words) walks a block to the home of Simon, the fisherman he has just called as a disciple. Because it was the Sabbath, it was a day to be with family and friends.

But, Simon's mother-in-law, perhaps the matriarch of the household, was sick in bed with a fever. Jesus was told about the illness. He took the woman's hand and lifted her up. The fever left her. She got out of bed and assumed her place in the house serving her guests a meal.

The example Jesus sets is clear. His ministry is both words and work, a message proclaimed and taught and then lived out lovingly with tangible provision of good help, good news and good deeds. We cannot speak and

act with the same personal authority as Jesus. But we do speak and act in the power of his Spirit. He was demonstrating to his new followers what they would be doing. We do pretty well with teaching and proclaiming God's good news on Sunday morning, and at the Presbyterian Women's Bible study that happens tomorrow morning, and at other Bible studies like the one later this month on Thursday evenings. But, Christian ministry cannot stop when we leave the church building. Like Jesus, as soon as we leave this sanctuary, we run into real human need: Down the street there's the lonely neighbor who lost a spouse, the family with a son or daughter in Iraq, the homeless walking the streets to keep warm, the child failing in school, and the person whose lifestyle is so different that we know they must feel alienated from most of the world around them.

Opportunities abound for us to make a positive difference in the lives of people all around us. Too often I find myself avoiding the chance to simply help an individual because the number of people in need seems so large. I wonder why the government doesn't step in or why some philanthropic foundation can't invent a program, or why the Salvation Army isn't on the job. In other words, it's somebody else's problem. Those possibilities may be worthwhile, but the first thing I can do is to give myself. The world's problems may remain, but if I can help one person, that person will be better off and I will have done my duty.

To take one example, our church is not in a position to house homeless persons this winter. But many other churches have opened their doors in this cold weather through the Pacem program for the homeless. Each week in winter, a different church welcomes men and women from the streets for a night's lodging, supper and breakfast, a change to wash up, and most importantly, some conversation with a caring person. Pacem needs volunteers to serve the meals and talk with those who seek shelter in the churches. We can help that way.

In our story, Jesus heals a fever. Our world is feverish with people out of work, with increasing numbers of the working poor, with a worried retired class, and with those of us who have decent jobs working to keep them. Whole nations are hot with anger at what they perceive as American arrogance and materialism. Our own governments at all levels from the smallest village to the Whitehouse are feverishly working the levers of power in an effort to restore prosperity. You and I cannot pull the country out of the hole it's in. We can reach out and take one person by the hand and lift them up.

As I've listened to interviews with economists analyzing the state of our country, I have noticed a consistent theme in their diagnosis. They say we have lost confidence. They say that banks are afraid to lend money; that consumers are afraid to spend money; that industries are afraid to invest in the future. Perhaps our confidence has been misplaced. Perhaps we have

leaned too heavily on material possessions as the guarantee of our future. Perhaps we have been overconfident about our ability to spend our way out of trouble, to hedge our bets on which stocks would rise and which stocks would fall, to predict the market. Perhaps confidence in the market is not the faith we need.

The followers of Jesus have the same message of hope proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught, and makes the
rulers of the earth as nothing.

....

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;

his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint,

and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary,

and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the Lord

shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall run and not faint.

We have a powerful model to guide the ministry of this congregation and every church. First, we have the example of Jesus himself who spoke with confidence about the nearness of God's reign on earth. He demonstrated God's power with his service to humankind. Second, we have the example of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. When Jesus reached out to her, he lifted her up and she began serving. God has lifted up South Plains and we too can begin serving.

From the distance of 2000 years, her service may look like servitude. We need to remember that from where she lay on that sickbed, she thought she was neglecting her guests. We need to see her as the first deacon in the church. Indeed the pages of the New Testament make clear that Jesus welcomed the ministry of women, befriended women who were outcast and engaged women in the work of the kingdom far more than many of his contemporaries. Despite Paul's concession to the times, his letters show that he also depended upon the leadership of women in his churches.

Since that phone call from my Congolese friend, I thought about his story. He was lifted up by Presbyterian schools and the church in Congo. He worked for Exxon in his country until his Christian convictions led him to

speak out against the former dictator, Mobutu. He fled to the United States as a refugee where he began a new life of service to the churches of this country.

However ministry is accomplished, followers of Jesus will tell the good news and live it out in deeds of loving service to the world. He has lifted up us. We also can lift up others in his name.