

5th Sun. After the Epiphany, Feb. 5, 2012
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
Centennial, Colorado
The Rev. Craig MacColl

Isaiah 40:21-31
I Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39
Year B

Hard Choices

In my sermon last Sunday I asked the question, “What would Jesus say to us if he were with us for our annual meeting day?” Towards the end of the sermon I described what Jesus might say to us about our current financial struggles. It’s always a little risky talking about money on Sunday morning, so I thought I would clarify why I chose to have Jesus focus on this issue.

This gospel story we just heard describes the second part of a sort of model day in the ministry of Jesus. We heard the first part last Sunday. Jesus is in Capernaum, a small town northeast of Nazareth – and it’s his first stop on the road since his baptism and temptation. He’s had a heck of a day – he taught in the synagogue, drove out some unclean spirits and healed, first Peter’s mother-in-law, and then, it seems a good portion of the town. In short, Jesus impressed the socks off everybody. But, as interesting as all that was, the really important thing that happened that day took place next.

Very early the next morning, Jesus went to a lonely place to pray. And while he was there, Peter and the other disciples tracked him down and told him that the whole town was searching for him. There are a few hints in the text that something big was going on. First, in the entire gospel of Mark, Mark mentions Jesus in prayer like this only three times, and each of these times is associated with a major turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Second, the Greek word used to describe the crowds searching for Jesus is *sinister*, which implies malice or misguided motives. So it’s very significant that Jesus, quite suddenly and without looking back, just up and leaves. It’s significant because we know that Jesus was a big hit in Capernaum. His approval ratings were off the chart. Why, then, would he take off like this?

Most likely, the town really liked what Jesus had done, and they wanted to keep him there so he could keep on doing it. The group of people that searched for him was probably the first century equivalent of a joint committee of the ministerial alliance, the Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Board. They

were working on an offer to Jesus that he couldn't refuse: they wanted him to set up shop in Capernaum – establish the Jesus of Nazareth Preaching and Healing Mission. The pay and benefits would be great, the hours negotiable, housing would doubtless have been provided, and taxes could be deferred indefinitely. There was no doubt that Jesus could put Capernaum on the map. The tourist trade and healing business would be good for everybody, the tax base would grow wonderfully, business would improve, and the citizens would have their own miracle worker around the next time they got sick. It was a good deal for everybody.

One of the ways that we often deny Jesus' humanity – and in doing that, remove his life from our lives – is by pretending that all of Jesus' decisions were easy and automatic....pretending that Jesus was reading from a script. But that's not how it happened. Jesus knew that the delegation from Capernaum was offering him security, safety, prosperity, and respect. These are things we all want, things everybody has always wanted. They are also things that Jesus knew he would never have if he left that town. If he became their resident rabbi, he wouldn't have to be poor, his family wouldn't think he was crazy, he could have a normal life, he wouldn't have to be cold, hungry, or afraid for his life. In fact, his life would be easier and better in every way we consider important.

As we all know, Jesus would not have been the first to trade challenge for security.... to swap the call of God for the rewards that come from giving the crowds what they want. No, Jesus' decision didn't come easily. It was so hard that he did exactly the same thing he did on the night before the crucifixion – he went off by himself to pray, to sweat out a tough decision.... to decide which voice to follow: the voices everyone could hear rolling up the hillside chanting, "We want Jesus," or the other, quieter voice that said, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus had to choose. And we all know what it's like to make that kind of choice. We know the power of security, prosperity, safety, and respect – especially these days. We know how easy it is to settle – to settle for being just a little less than who we know we can be....to listen to those loud voices....to let their expectations rule. After all, there comes a certain point when questions like this begin to matter...times when they begin to cost.....when things get painful. And when that happens, the sense of who we are – of what it means to be the beloved child of

God – can easily fade into the background. So we have to make choices....and God waits patiently to see what will happen.

Another way that we live out this story is that, as a church community, we have to make pretty much the same decision that the people of Capernaum had to make. We have to decide what to do about Jesus. We have to decide what to do about this guy who come to us proclaiming the kingdom of God, and bringing healing, and hope, and a vision of new life. In Capernaum they decided to take the part of Jesus they liked best – a good preacher, an effective healer – and capture it....institutionalize it. They decided to locate him in their place, at their convenience, and for their purposes. They didn't want to be challenged. They wanted to be coddled. They didn't want to see beyond his gift of healing, to see what that gift might ask of them. They wanted Jesus to keep doing the neat stuff. And, in exchange, they were willing to offer him material security and popular acclaim.

When we look at this story, we begin to realize that Jesus was always offering people a choice – a choice between two different visions of life...two lifestyles. The choice Jesus offers us is whether we, the people of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, want our church community to be a kind of 21st century Capernaum....a community where we celebrate and appreciate all the wonderful things that Jesus has done – his power to heal us, his teaching, his love shared with us sacramentally in the Eucharist.....a community where we find the support and encouragement of friends in a comfortable well appointed church facility, where we learn about the spiritual life, where we experience the satisfaction of being generous to others.

Or do we want do want our church to be something more....something more than a nice, warm, friendly community of people who happen to think that Jesus is pretty good guy. Do we, for example, want our church to be a place where people also experience the presence of God in powerful ways that might not always be comforting or secure? Do we, for example, see the Eucharist, not just as a comforting reminder of what God has done for us in Jesus, but as a source of strength and power that literally infuses us with God's life of grace and sends us out to change the world? In this view of church, we actually believe that God has given us the authority to heal and to bring new life to others.

To be sure, we need to know Jesus like the people in Capernaum did. We need to hear his word, and to know the power, the mercy and the grace of his leaning love. We can do nothing without that. But if we stop there....if we try to limit or control where the Lord is or what he does, if we try to pay him to keep up the good work....if we make the church into a kind of comfort station....then maby we've missed the point.

Perhaps the only person in Capernaum who really understood all of this was Peter's mother-in-law. The gospel says, "He came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her; and she began to serve them." She didn't try to put Jesus in the medicine cabinet or in a shop window down the street. She served. She moved beyond herself and the gift she had been given. She became a channel of this new, divine life Jesus was offering.

This is the point I was trying to make last Sunday. When the clergy start talking about money, people often become uncomfortable. What I was trying to do was to say, very simply that, as a community, we have choices, just like Jesus had choices...just like the people of Capernaum had choices. For us, the choice is whether we want to be like the people of Capernaum.... or whether we want to be a transformed people who seek to be channels of God's grace in the world around us. As the church, we can try to hire Jesus, or we can strive to serve him, which means to serve as he did. It's really a hard choice, as hard as our personal choices between comfort and faithfulness, as hard as Jesus' choices between taking the cushy job or moving on.

In the end, money is simply an instrument. It can be a way for us to conform to the culture and the society around us, or it can be a tool for us to live a different kind of lifestyle. I would never presume to tell you how to live your life or how to spend your money. All I can do is invite you to consider the kinds of choices Jesus offers us, and pray that, together, we can make those choices faithfully. **Amen.**