

How to Spread the Word Mark 1: 29-39

At the end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives his followers what we have come to call the Great Commission: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.* This Great Commission has been the impetus for the spread of Christianity over the centuries and throughout the whole world. We continued the tradition even today, with the baptism of Jennifer Ashley.

Make disciples...baptize...and teach. Jesus told us to do these things but he did not tell us exactly how. **It seems that how to spread the Word is up to us.** And of course, over all those centuries, the methods - for making disciples, baptizing and teaching - have changed, over and over and over again, thus producing much of the history and variety within the Christian church.

Furthermore, what works in one part of the world doesn't necessarily work in another and so you have to make the gospel understandable in a variety of situations and languages and cultures. As we read earlier from his letter to the Corinthians, Paul knew this very early on: *for though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them...I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*

How to spread the Word not only changes over time and from place to place, but it also produces some troublesome questions as we try to figure out what the “how” will be for us in our time and place. How do we draw people into worship on Sunday morning? Should we worship at another time in order to have better attendance? What kind of music is right? How can we attract more young people and not lose the older generation? Is listening to the radio evangelist or watching a service on TV as good as attending church? How should a Christian talk about faith with her Muslim co-worker? And on and on.

How to spread the Word is, then, a question of the mechanics of proclamation. To proclaim is to make public, to announce officially, and to make unmistakably clear. And this is what Jesus did in his ministry, as we read in Mark: *And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.* **But proclamation is not just a matter putting words together and presenting them in some format or another. Proclamation is also the Word made visible and active so that we, as God’s people, participate in the Word, experience it and have it live within us.** Jesus shows us how to do that too, in ways that we should keep in front of us as we go about proclaiming the Word in our time and place.

First, the Word is made visible and active in the healing power of Christ. In today’s passage, we heard how Jesus drove away the fever that gripped Simon’s mother-in-law, and then later, *That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons...and he cured many who were sick with various diseases.* I daresay that this power

of the Word of God to heal is not absent from our own lives. Some of us have experienced such a miracle or heard of one. But even the reading of Scripture with a person who is sick or feeling hopeless has a way of lifting the spirit and bringing hope. The words come alive and Jesus, the Word incarnate, comes alive for both of you. A miracle of healing can take place.

Second, the Word is made visible and active through prayer. *In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.* What for, do you suppose? Peace and quiet? Energy? Patience? Jesus was being besieged with people pleading to be healed, but he knew how important it was for him to be alone with God and to pray, to keep in touch with God for support and encouragement. Jesus sets the example. We all need that time away, that time of being alone with God, to feel the blessing of God wash over us to strengthen and sustain our lives. Prayer is a way that the Word is made active in our personal lives, when we pray alone and when we pray together.

Third, the Word is made visible and active through the very presence of Christ. The scriptures were written about a time when Jesus was a physical presence in the world. And the people, seeing what he could do for them, wanted him to be with them everywhere, all the time. When he goes off to pray, early in the day and alone, they come after him. *Simon and his companions hunted for him [and] When they found him, they said, "Everyone is searching for you."* Deep down, I believe, we all crave the presence of God in our lives, and we want to trust that God is still active in the world. I wonder how many true atheists there actually are.

The church holds that Christ is present among us and that we see him in the work we do in mission and teaching and worship. And we believe that the Word is made visible and active through the sacraments – of baptism and of Holy Communion, both of which we celebrate today.

Phyllis Hubbell tells a story that ties together these three aspects of the visible Word – healing and prayer and the presence of God - that, even though it is an old tale, offers a glimmer of hope for our own time. (In your minds, you may want to make a Christian adaptation.) She writes:

One of my favorite stories about prayer is a legend about the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic sect of Jews. When the Baal Shem Tov realized he was dying, he called his followers together. “During my lifetime I have acted as intermediary for you. Now you must do this for yourselves. You know the place in the forest where I call to God. Go there to the same place and light a fire as I have instructed you. Then say the prayer I have taught you. If you do all this, God will come.”

The first generation did exactly as he had said, and God came. But the next forgot exactly how they were to light the fire. Nevertheless, they faithfully went to the special place in the forest and said the same prayer as their parents had. Sure enough, God appeared.

The third generation came along. They not only did not know how to light the fire, they had forgotten exactly where they were supposed to go in the forest. But they said the same prayer and God answered. Several generations more came and went. Now no one remembered how to light the fire or where the special place was. Nor could anyone remember the words to the prayer. But one person still remembered the story. And God still came.

The analogy isn't perfect, [says Hubbell]. Still, [she continues], I can identify with that last generation. Most of us have only a tiny morsel of faith remaining. Something calls us to live lives of integrity and courage but we don't know what it is or how to access it. We have lost hope in miracles. We stand before the altar. We keep our

eyes open during the prayers. We don't remember and [maybe] we don't believe in the prayers of our youth. Yet that tiny morsel of faith in something we may not be able to name is strong enough to keep us going, sometimes giving our lives in the service of what a previous generation...called God. ("Jesus Christ Can't Get" 50)

How to spread the Word is more than preaching, and hearing, a bang-up sermon or running a good PR campaign or keeping the church building in good shape. Spreading the Word is keeping our faith visible and alive from generation to generation. It's letting the word get around that here is where healing takes place; from here heartfelt prayers are raised. Here is where we experience together the very presence of Jesus Christ.

"Jesus Christ Can't Get a Driver's License." *Homiletics* Feb. 2006: 47-51.

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February 5, 2006