

January 28, 2024
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Mark 1:21-28
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Kingdom of God Has Come Near

Last week I hosted two groups of church and community leaders here at Emmanuel for our monthly meetings. One of the groups was the Norwood Clergy group and this month we were joined by the Chief and Deputy Chief of the Norwood police, so that we could learn more about the needs and concerns of our community. The other group was the Boston Metro Conference group of Lutheran pastors and deacons, who serve different settings, congregations, of course, but also as hospital chaplains, chaplains in mental health facilities, and campus chaplains.

People in both groups take turns hosting these gatherings and I figured, why not take my turn right out of the gate, at the beginning of the new year. Of course, it only occurred to me later that hosting these meetings, two days in a row, during the same week that we were preparing for our January congregational meeting might not have been the most brilliant idea I'd ever come up with. Still, it's always good to get together with my colleagues and other community leaders to look beyond our walls and hear what is going on in other churches, other communities and what other people's needs and concerns are.

When it comes to other congregations, it's interesting to hear how similar so many of our experiences are. For example, one of our neighbor congregations here in Norwood is also needing to do major work on their heating system. Sound familiar? It's also valuable to hear and celebrate the creative ways that people are doing ministry in their settings and contexts.

It's also helpful to hear about the work of chaplains, doing ministry in settings other than congregations. It's good to hear about the work of people who are

charged with bearing Christ outside the church walls to people, many of whom describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious, agnostic, or even without faith. It's interesting to hear about the needs they encounter, the questions people have, and the deep yearning so many people have for connection to God.

Interestingly, with the police officers I met with this week it was the same. Obviously, they are secular leaders, but in Norwood, our police have a deep commitment to community policing, to being accessible and present and known entities in the community, rather than just showing up when there's a crisis or a breach. Because our police are committed to being present in the community they know about where the struggles are, where the needs are, where the pain is, and they also know the good stuff, the generosity, the signs of hope, the people who day in and day out are working to lift up their neighbors and make their community a better place to live.

It was good this week, to hear from neighbors and colleagues more about what's going on beyond our walls, and beyond my own and our own needs and concerns. It's good to make time to listen to other voices and to be challenged, inspired, and consoled by other people's stories, ministries, and witness to the needs and the goodness they see in their daily lives.

One of the things that my Lutheran colleagues and I did at our meeting was worship together. We shared prayers and communion and we also discussed the gospel reading for today. One of the comments that one of the other pastors made was that he has always wondered exactly what it was that Jesus was teaching.

I've mentioned in sermons before that Jesus seemed to be a religious person. The gospels describe him as going to synagogue regularly on the sabbath day. Our gospel reading for today finds Jesus and his disciples in the synagogue on the sabbath, and Jesus was teaching. And those who heard him, who heard his teaching, wondered at it. They were astounded at his message, and the authority that he had.

But here's the thing. Mark never tells us the content of Jesus' teaching. The gospels of Matthew and Luke both have summaries of Jesus' teachings, the sermon on the mount in Matthew and the sermon on the plain in Luke, but Mark never gives us the specifics of Jesus' message, except for one place, at the very beginning of the gospel and the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, in Mark 1:15 when we hear Jesus say, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

We don't know, from Mark, the specifics of how Jesus expanded on that message, beyond his parables, but we do know that was the core of Jesus' message in Mark. That the kingdom of God had come near and that people were called to repent, to turn around, to change, and believe in the good news.

So, when Jesus went to synagogues and taught, when he taught in village squares, when he taught in people's homes, and around their dinner tables, we can safely assume that he was telling them more about that, more about the nearness of God, more about this kingdom of God. And what we learn from all of scripture and certainly from Jesus is that God's kingdom is one of justice and mercy, one of love and generosity, and one of holiness. Jesus was probably telling those who heard him how to turn, how to change, how to walk in the way of that kingdom, guided, consoled, transformed, strengthened, by the nearness of God.

For Jesus' message was not bad news. The nearness of God was always a promise and never a threat. People were told that the arrival of the kingdom of God was good news, joy and hope for the world. Good news for them and for their lives and for their families and for their neighbors, and even, for their enemies.

Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus talked about, but he did tell us that people were impressed to hear it. People were astounded by his words, by his teaching, by his authority. Some were probably thrilled to hear about the nearness of God, the coming of holiness into the world, to be close to them, to change them.

But there was an unclean spirit in the synagogue, that had its grip on a man and used him for its voice shouting through the man, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” (Mark 1:24)

The unclean spirit had no doubts about who Jesus was and what he had come to do. Jesus had come to bring holiness into the world, to bring God into the world in a way that was accessible, in a way that related to people’s every day lives, in a way that helped people to know that they were not alone, that they belonged to God and to each other. And while this was very good news, it was not good news to the unclean spirit.

So, Jesus had his first dramatic, public encounter, his first dramatic, public conflict with the powers that wanted to silence him, the powers that wanted to distract his listeners, the powers that wanted to shut Jesus up and set Jesus up for a fall.

The result of that conflict seems like a win for Jesus. He rebuked the unclean spirit and it came out of the man and left them man free. Transformed. And the people who saw it were thrilled, amazed, even more astounded by what they had heard, and even more by what they had seen. They had seen God’s power at work in the world, they had seen Jesus’ authority. Could they doubt in that moment that God was near? Could they doubt in that moment that God was with them? Could they doubt, in that moment, that the kingdom of God had come near?

And I think that that’s what so many people want today. They want the dramatic moment, the moment of authority. They want to be amazed, to be left with no doubts. They want to see the power of God at work in the world in a way that transforms. They want to see spiritual powers at work in the world for good. They want to see the power and authority from someone and Jesus will do.

That's what so many people in our spiritual but not religious culture are looking for; those who have turned their backs on churches, as yesterday's news, as a relic of a bygone time, as a corrupt system, representing empty religion.

What we are about to do today isn't going to help. After this service we're going to have a meeting that is mandated by our constitution, and by secular laws, governing non-profit organizations, for the purpose of electing leaders, reviewing the past year's accomplishments, reviewing the organization's finances, and setting the budget for the new year. A new teaching, with authority! Not really. It all just sounds very secular and corporate. It doesn't sound much like the kingdom of God drawn near. It doesn't sound much like something that is going to cause people to repent, to turn around, to change their lives.

But if you look behind the official skin of the event, what do you see, what do you hear, what do you read? If you look closely enough, you might be surprised. You might actually see the kingdom of God come near.

You will see people loving one another. You will see people serving the global community. You will see the miracle of small offerings brought together to do big things. You will see lives transformed. You will see the power and teachings of Jesus shaping us, not in big and splashy ways, but in ways that bit by bit, moment by moment, Sunday by Sunday, day by day, week by week, change our lives, and change the world.

When we eat together, when we share what we have, when we sing and make music together, when we care for each other, when we use our gifts and talents to serve others, when we have the courage to be people of hope in a world of despair, we celebrate and witness to the kingdom of God which has come near, and that, drawing near, helps us to repent, to turn around, to change, and to be transformed. into people who bear Jesus, the Holy one of God into the world. Amen.