

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of you know that my family and I lived in Russia for four years over the turn of the millennium, from 1999 to 2003. I've been prompted to think about that time in our lives by recent events in the news. We in the United States have been having enough drama lately in our politics and in our efforts to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic, so I would not be surprised if you have not been following the political drama in Russia. I have former students and colleagues I still keep in touch with, mostly by Facebook, and through them I have gotten some first- and second-hand accounts of the recent protests and the police response that has shut down travel to and from the centers of the major cities. That's why I included Russia and its people in our prayers last Sunday. Things have calmed down a bit this weekend, but the crisis is far from over.

At any rate, it is not just this that has drawn my attention to our time in Russia. It's also, in a roundabout way, our Gospel reading from Mark that has sparked a few memories. During our time there, we effectively lived in two different worlds. One world was the Russian Lutheran church, for which I taught seminary students church history and theology. The other world was the expatriate community of diplomats and business people associated with the Anglo-American school that our children attended. One expat family that we got to know well was from Finland. The husband and father of that family worked for a very famous Swedish company that was expanding into Russia. Now you probably know that church attendance especially in northern Europe declined greatly over the 20th century, and Finland is a part of that story. So, even though Finland is nominally Lutheran and two thirds of the population are officially members of the Lutheran church, less than 2% of the population actually attends church on a weekly basis, as opposed to 24% in the United States. This Finish family that we knew was not part of that 2%. During one of our visits, I got into a discussion with the father about my work with the church. He could not wrap his head around what the point of it all was. His work was in securing raw materials, particularly lumber, for his company's manufacturing – very straightforward, very tangible. But when it came to the church, he just didn't understand. "But what does it *do*?" he would ask. It was a surprising question for me, and caught me a bit off guard. I wish I could remember what I said in response, but I do remember that it wasn't very convincing to him.

This Finish fellow is of course not alone in his thinking about the church, or his way of thinking about things in general. We like tangible result. I'm sure that's why my shed-building project last summer was so satisfying. All that hard work resulted in something that I can point to. "Look what I did!" I can say to myself every time I look out our back windows. (Or, "look what WE did," when I'm being more fair.) I think the disciples, and the people in Capernaum, had a similar reaction to Jesus after he cast out demons and healed so many sick people. Here was a useful fellow, someone whose actions got results. The sick were healed, demons were cast out. I don't pretend to understand how that worked, but I read the text here on its own terms: Jesus did these things and the people could see the immediate results.

And that's why this second half of our reading is so interesting, and so illuminating. Jesus gets up very early the next morning and goes off by himself to pray. His disciples eventually find him, and by what they say to him we can guess that it took some time to find him. "Everyone is searching for you," they say. Now this might be just me reading into the text here, but I detect some inflection in these words that would reveal an underlying attitude: "EVERYONE is LOOKING for you!!!" Or in other words, "What on earth are you doing out here? Praying? There are all kinds of sick and possessed people back in town waiting for you to heal them. Come on, Jesus, we want an

encore of yesterday's performance. You were a big hit. People love your work. They're telling all their friends. Come on back and do some more."

Jesus' response is that it's time to move on to the neighboring towns. Why? To proclaim the message there also. "*That* is what I came out to do," says Jesus. This response of Jesus is the most important sentence in our reading this morning, because it shows us that even though Jesus spent all that time healing and casting out demons, that was not his central task, not what he came to do. He did not come to set up a clinic in Capernaum, as much as a clinic was needed. He came to proclaim that the reign of God was near, and to call on people to repent and trust that good news. And so that's what he does. He goes all throughout Galilee proclaiming the message that he came to proclaim. And also casting out demons. Healing and casting out demons was not what he came out to do, but it was a result of what he came out to do, a result of the kingdom of God coming near. Because of who he was, he could also not help caring for the people he came to address.

As I said earlier, I don't think my Finish acquaintance was alone in his bewilderment about what the church actually does. I think we in the church get confused about that too. I recently read through an online discussion in one of the ELCA Facebook groups. The consensus seemed to be that it wasn't our Sunday morning worship services that made us the church, but what we did to help people out in our communities. *That's* what a *real* church does. Nobody was saying that we *shouldn't* gather for worship, but they did seem to be suggesting that that was only secondary, and also maybe self-serving.

I understand the impulse here. If what we do on a Sunday morning has no connection at all to our daily lives or to the world around us – if what happens in church stays in church, to paraphrase the Las Vegas motto – then to be sure we are missing something vital about what it means to be the church. But to imagine that the church is first and foremost a social service organization and that worship and faith-formation are only secondary or even self-indulgent, is to profoundly misconstrue what Jesus came to do.

What today's Gospel reading clarifies for us is that our central task as the church, following in Jesus' footsteps, is to gather regularly around the message that Jesus both proclaimed and embodied, the good news of God's coming, just-around-the-corner kingdom, and to nurture faith and trust in that promise born of repentance. Through God's means of grace, word and sacrament, confession and absolution, God reorients us and realigns our values with those of God – makes of us a new creation. And because of who we are, because of who God has recreated us to be through these means of grace, we can't help reaching out to our neighbors in love and service.

Grace's food pantry is a perfect case in point. It is not central to who we are as the church. It is not even, as you may know, a part of our congregational budget. It has its own, separate budget. But *because* of our central task, because of the work of the Holy Spirit through that task, the people of God in this place, transformed by God's love, can't help but dedicate themselves to the important work of helping to feed our neighbors in need. It's who we are! One of the highlights of my week, especially during this pandemic, is greeting the food pantry staff every Thursday morning. And if we weren't doing this, or something like it, I would worry about whether we were doing a good job of our central task. But as it is, are doing this, and for that I thank God.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this is the message that defines the church: God has come among us in Jesus Christ to save us from the power of sin, death, and evil and to rule our hearts by love. We have been claimed in Holy Baptism as children of God and made partners in God's ongoing creative and redeeming work in the world. Treasure that message. May its promise be the catalyst for the Holy Spirit to create faith in us that is active in love. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.