

Does Preaching Make any Difference?
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 5B
Mark 1:29-39

You may not believe it but those of us in the preaching profession sometimes wonder if it does any good. We work at our sermons week after week, study the Scriptures, consult our commentaries; we jot down notes on paper napkins, practice dramatic gestures, think out loud; and when Sunday comes we stand in the pulpit with pounding hearts, say our piece, and then step down for the closing hymn wondering if it has made any difference at all.

I was at my first church four-and-a-half years. Those were good people there in that small, Kentucky town. They were honest, hardworking, kind. But were they any better at the end of those four-and-a-half years than they were at the beginning? Had my preaching made any difference? I don't know. I was at my next church twice as long—nine years. Those people, too, were fine Christians when I came and fine Christians when I left. But were they any finer? Had my preaching done anything for them? I'm not sure that it had. The same could be said for my church in Washington and the seven-and-a-half years I spent climbing the steps of that impressive pulpit. Did my preaching leave any lasting impression on those people? Were they formed in any way by my many words? And after a dozen years at my current church have my carefully crafted sermons made any difference at all? It's hard to say.

When a man digs a ditch he knows, at the end of the day, just how much of the ditch he has dug, but when a man preaches a sermon he can't tell, really, how much of his work has been done and how much is left to do. I'm not saying this so you will tell me what a profound impact my preaching is having on your life. I'm only saying it because it's true. I work with words, not spades, and the digging that I do is not the kind that can be easily seen. It is measured in inches,

not feet. If preaching has any results at all they are often inner and invisible, and that's why ministers are often tempted to spend their time on other, more measurable things.

I got a call from a former seminary classmate once who told me that he was going into full-time evangelism. "How did you make that decision?" I asked, and he talked about being in Russia when Billy Graham was there, about having the opportunity to preach once himself, and seeing people respond, by the hundreds, to his invitation. I could understand the appeal of that kind of ministry. How satisfying it would be to say, at the end of a week, "A hundred more souls saved. Guess I can take tomorrow off!"

Ministers often get involved in building programs before they really need to so they can see some results from their labor, so they can point back at the end of their tenure and say, "At least there's that." Others spend time in counseling or visiting, both of which can be more rewarding than the time it takes to prepare a thoughtful sermon. Preaching is like cooking, and the lasting benefits of serving a meal and delivering a sermon are roughly the same. At least, that's how it seems.

At one of my churches I knew a man who was confined to a wheelchair. He was a university professor, just about my age, and the interesting thing about his story is that he hadn't always been in a wheelchair. He told me that one afternoon when he was a teenager he played basketball with his brother and when he woke up the next morning he couldn't feel his legs. From that morning to this one he has not been able to walk.

That kind of tragedy can make you bitter, or it can make you better. In Greg's case it made him better. He began to focus his energies on his studies, exploring his love for mathematics and eventually producing a 600-page doctoral dissertation. After his father's death Greg was a great comfort to his mother and somehow in his care for her and her care for him she

made it through her grief. She told me once about her son, Greg: “He’s the best person I know.” He is the best person a lot of people know. He is patient, and thoughtful, and funny, and wise. He is loved by the people of that little town, by his students at the university, and by the members of his church family. It was one of those— a member of his church family— who once asked me what I would do if I were Jesus.

“If I were Jesus?”

“Yeah. What would you do?”

“Hmm . . . I guess I would try to do the things Jesus did. I mean, I’m not sure I could improve on that. How about you?”

He was quiet for a moment, thoughtful, and then he said, “I would heal Greg.”

And then we were both quiet, imagining Greg getting up out of that chair, standing straight and tall, taking his first steps in more than thirty years. If my friend were Jesus, that’s what he would do. Which raised for both of us the question:

Why didn’t Jesus do it?

In our Gospel lesson for this morning we learn that one of the things Jesus did, very early in his ministry, was heal the sick. He came to Simon Peter’s house after synagogue on the Sabbath and found Peter’s mother-in-law in bed with a high fever. He took her by the hand, and lifted her up, and immediately the fever left her and she began to serve them their dinner. News of that healing got out the door, somehow, and all over that small town so that by sundown, when the Sabbath officially ended, Jesus had plenty of work to do. Mark says that the whole city was gathered around the door.

Tell me the truth: if you knew there was someone in your town who could heal the sick, or even if you only thought he might be able to heal the sick, isn't there someone you would want to bring to him? Isn't there some wheelchair somewhere you would want to roll up to his door? Some hospital bed you would want to push through the streets? Maybe you would want to bring yourself, under your own power, for the healing you alone know you need. Can you imagine standing before him as he looks into your eyes and asks, "What do you need me to do for you, daughter? What kind of healing do you want, my son?" Whatever their reasons everybody in the little town of Capernaum found some reason to be outside the door where Jesus was in the hope that he could heal. And he did heal. He worked late into the night apparently, "curing many who were sick with various diseases and casting out demons." He was a sensation, and the sensation created a crisis in his ministry.

Mark tells us that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, but he doesn't give us many details. You have to look to Matthew or Luke for that. There we learn that Satan tempted him first of all by asking him to turn stones into bread. It would have been a good thing to do. There were so many stones out there in the wilderness that if anyone could turn them into bread that person could feed the nation, could feed the world. And that would be a good thing, wouldn't it? Behind Satan's suggestion that Jesus turn stones into bread to feed his own hunger was the more subtle temptation to feed the world's hunger, and Jesus must have labored over his answer. "Man does not live by bread alone," he said, at last. "But by every word that comes from the mouth of God." It was a recognition of the difference between those things that are temporal and those that are eternal. Feed someone today and you will need to feed him again tomorrow, but give him the word of life and he can live forever.

Does that mean that we have no obligation to feed the hungry? Of course it doesn't. We collect food at my church week after week. We store it on shelves in our food pantry. We put it in bags and give it to those who need it. As long as there are hungry people in the world the followers of Jesus will have an obligation to feed them, as he did when the multitudes were hungry. But both he and we know that there is a difference between that which fills the belly and that which feeds the soul. One lasts for a few hours; the other can last forever.

But think back to that evening in Capernaum, when Jesus was touching and healing the sick. Think of the wonder on their faces, the gratitude, as crippled limbs were straightened, as atrophied muscles grew strong, as people walked who hadn't walked in years, as they leaped and danced and whirled. Think of those who were doubled over with illness standing straight and tall; those who were covered with weeping sores becoming clean and whole; those who were dying of disease feeling healthy and strong and able again. Could there be anything on earth more satisfying than having that power and using it for that purpose? The gratitude would have been overwhelming, the response enormous. News would have spread like wildfire across the Galilee and every person who could push a wheelchair would be pushing one—fast—to that place where Jesus was.

These are the thoughts that must have been going through his head as he tried to sleep that night. Exhausted by the day's events he would have fallen into bed sometime after midnight and dropped off immediately, but after a few hours, after the strength had come back into his body, he would have started to stir, would have seen their faces again. The desperate need that was there. The hands reaching out toward him, trying to touch him. The mothers holding out their babies. The fathers bringing their sons. He would have tossed and turned on his narrow

bed re-living the whole experience until sometime long before daybreak he got up from his bed and slipped out the door to find a quiet place to pray.

He went to the wilderness, Mark says, a word that has only been used once before in this Gospel. The wilderness is where the Spirit drove him to be tempted by Satan and on that morning in Capernaum it seemed to be driving him again to a place where he could wrestle with temptation. The temptation that faced him in that hour was the temptation to make his ministry a ministry of healing alone. It was such an obvious need. And people were so obviously grateful for it. He could spend the rest of his days healing and never run out of opportunity, never run out of appreciation. But praying in that deserted place early in the morning Jesus must have come to the painful realization that all healing is temporary. We get well only to get sick again. We stand up only to fall down. In the end these mortal bodies of ours must surrender to their mortality, and even if we had been healed by Jesus fifty times in our hundred years we would still die. It was that thought that must have come to his clouded mind in the sobering act of prayer. And when the disciples came looking for him he was ready.

“Where have you been?” they asked. “We’ve been searching for you everywhere. Everyone wants to know where you are.” In their minds they may have already decided that the course of his ministry had been determined. They would open a clinic right there in Capernaum; put up a nice big, building with a large, comfortable waiting room. They would pave a few acres for a parking lot and put up a sign over the door that read, “Real miracles, sensibly priced.”

“Let’s go,” they said. “Everybody is looking for you.”

But Jesus surprised them with his answer. “Let’s go to the other towns in the area,” he said, “so that I can preach the good news there, too. That’s what I came to do.” In the discipline of prayer Jesus had wrestled with temptation and remembered his mission. He hadn’t come to

heal the sick, but to establish God’s Kingdom, and the best way to do that—he believed—was not through healing but through preaching.

So, Sunday after Sunday, I step up to the pulpit, believing along with Jesus that it makes a difference—not that sudden, dramatic difference that everybody is talking about the next day, but that almost imperceptible difference that works in a person’s life like yeast working in a lump of dough until, over time, it makes all the difference in the world. William Willimon says about preaching, “Sometimes a word is heard. Someone is challenged all the way to the tip of the soul; the world is torn apart and reconstructed in such a way that that person can only turn around and be converted or else live embarrassingly out of step with the way he or she clearly sees the world to be.”ⁱ

That’s what we hope for, we preachers, and that’s why we keep preaching. We’re hoping that through the foolishness of what we preach a word might be heard, a life might be changed, and the kingdom of God might come at last, on earth as it is in heaven.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2021

ⁱ*What’s Right with the Church*, pp. 111-112.