

"Why Miracles?"
Mark 1:29-39

February 4, 2018

5th Sunday After The Epiphany

I'm sure you've heard the following motto: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." This phrase is used in areas such as education, sports, and business as a key for success. In any of these areas, it is not as if doing a variety of activities is bad or harmful. However, being wrapped up in so many activities distracts an institution, team, or business from accomplishing what it was designed to do. For example, if a school is overflowing with sports and other extra-curricular activities, students may fail to get the education for which the school was established. If athletes get caught up with endorsements and personal appearances, their team may lose games and, thus, championships, for which they are there to win. If a business gets hamstrung by labor disputes so that labor is fighting against management and management is disregarding labor, the business may fail to produce and sell a quality product at a good profit for which the company was established.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. That's also a good motto for the church of Jesus Christ. The only trouble is deciding WHAT the main thing is so that we can keep the main thing the main thing.

People will often take a text like our Gospel reading for today and use it to determine what that main thing is. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law from a fever. In the evening, when the Sabbath was over, people came to Jesus with all the sick and demon possessed people. Jesus healed the people of various diseases and drove out many demons. It would appear from this and the fact that, according to one commentator, 47% of the verses in the first ten chapters of Mark are devoted to stories of miracles that the main thing for Jesus Christ was the performance of miracles and that He came to be a sort of Divine Social Worker and relieve human suffering.

Some have taken this as a similar mandate for Christ's Church. People see the main thing for the church is to relieve human suffering. They see the church's task to be centered around providing food, clothing, and shelter for the poor and homeless; offering free health clinics in their facilities; starting self-help groups and support groups for people with various problems; and so on...rather than being "too religious".

Now, there is certainly nothing wrong with a church seeking to end human suffering any more than it is wrong for a school to offer sports and other extra-curricular activities. Relieving suffering is good and we feel good when we do it. However, social ministry is not and cannot be the main thing. Why? Because they were not the main thing for Jesus.

In the second part of our text, after a long day of healing people, Jesus got up early and went off to pray. When Simon and the disciples came looking for Him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you!" While they may have just wondered where Jesus was, it might be that the people were looking for more miracles and that more people needed healing. Jesus' response is interesting. He says, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." That - the preaching

-- is why He came. The message was the main thing for Jesus. But why? What could there be in a mere message that could make it the main thing, even outranking miracles and relieving human suffering?

The message that Jesus came to bring was not one of social, political, or military optimism which promised the people health, wealth, and success. Nor was it a religious message only along the lines of "Smile! God loves you!" His message for the people was the most profound and important message ever delivered: that the God of heaven and earth was interested in them; that He had plans to reconcile them to Himself; and that He intended to have fellowship with them for all eternity.

Of course, the notion of "reconciling" implies that there is a problem, a rift between God and humankind. Jesus came to deal with that. But awesome miracles, healing of sicknesses, and even casting out evil spirits would not bring about reconciliation. To do that would be like treating cancer with Tylenol. Tylenol may relieve some of the symptoms of cancer temporarily, but it cannot cure the disease. If only the symptoms of a disease are treated, you may experience a temporary time of relief but the disease will still kill you.

In the same way, diseases and demon possession, as well as poverty, hunger, and even death were not the problem in Jesus' time. They were only symptoms of a much bigger problem: people's rebellion against God which we call sin. It is that sin which not only causes all the pain and suffering that we experience in this world, but it is also that which dooms all people to an eternal separation from God in hell. To take care of the symptoms of sin only may provide temporary relief, but it still leaves the center ultimately bound for death and hell.

Jesus, by shouldering the guilt for our sin and offering up His innocent life in the place of sinful humanity, closed the rift and tore down the barrier between people and God. By rising from the dead, Jesus opened the way to eternal fellowship with God for all people. Thus, He became not only the bearer of the message, but He became the message Himself. All who put their trust in Him, rather than themselves and their own merit, are reconciled with God, have peace with Him, and are assured of everlasting life, freed from all the symptoms that sin burdened them with during this life.

It is no wonder why Jesus made this the main thing in His ministry. Ultimately, nothing else matters. If Jesus would have "wowed" them with more spectacular miracles, healed all the diseases in the world, cast out all the demons, and even raised to life every person who had ever died, it would not have changed the fact that they all would have died and spent an eternity in hell. On the other hand, because Jesus did what He did and got the message out, there is hope despite any problem or difficulty. Because the disease of sin has been cured by Christ, the symptoms can no longer harm anyone.

This is why proclaiming this message -- the Gospel -- the good news -- is still the main thing for the church to be doing today. Nothing else matters in the long run. We can try to relieve human suffering and meet the needs of people in our congregation, our community, our country and our world. We can pass out food vouchers and gas cards until they're all gone. We might even succeed in some small way and we might feel good about that which we are able to accomplish. But if they don't hear the

message of who they are as sinners and what Christ has done for them, they will die in their sin, apart from God. And how good can we really feel about what we have done if these people never come to believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and they die with their greatest need - peace with God - unmet?

Therefore, proclaiming the message is not only the reason why Jesus came but the reason why we exist as a church. Proclaiming the message of God's Law and our guilt in breaking it is essential, even in a world where people there are no standards or that we are free to create our own standards and where guilt is seen as bad. Proclaiming the message of God's unconditional love and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ and His life, death, and resurrection is essential when people will die eternally without it.

Proclaiming the Word of God from this pulpit, in our Sunday School classrooms and Bible Class rooms, and in our own individual witnessing efforts is what we are to be all about as a church and as Christians. The Spirit of God, working through our humble and imperfect efforts, will bring about results - bringing people to repentance over their sins and bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ so that their greatest need -- to be at peace with their God now and forever -- may be met.

Does that mean we ignore people's physical needs and pay attention only to spiritual needs? Not at all. Jesus didn't, but He kept it in proper perspective and we need to do the same. The Bible says that Jesus did miracles because He had compassion on people. How could He not? He created them. He is love. We know how it is when we see our children sick and suffering. Jesus felt the same when He saw anyone suffering.

His compassion moved Him to act. You and I have experienced Christ's love. We know that He loved us enough to come and die for us on the cross and to rise again for us. We have experienced the relief of having our sins forgiven and the joy of knowing that we will live forever. It is that love in us that will also move us to have compassion on those in need. It is that love that will move us to act on those people. It is that love which will empower us to serve our fellow Christians as well as anyone in need, whether they be rich or poor, black or white, pleasant or unpleasant. We will express our love in acts of service toward other people, not because it will meet their greatest need, but because our greatest need has already been met.

Secondly, Jesus did miracles in order to draw attention to who He was so that they would listen to His message. His miracles were often referred to as "signs". They were to point to Him as the Messiah, the fulfillment of prophecies of long ago, and thus worthy of people's attention. In other words, He did miracles so that people would listen to Him.

In our acts of love and service, we are to draw attention to who we are - the children of God who have received the most precious gift of all. Jesus tells us to do that. He said, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." People are to notice that we, as Christians, live differently so that they might be drawn to inquire why we are different because they want to be that way, too. Peter says in his first letter, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1

Peter 3:15) The assumption here is that people will notice by your behavior that you do have hope. In the early days of the church, before it became a legal religion in the Roman empire, one non-Christian, who saw how the Christians lived and behaved was moved to remark, "See those Christians -- how they love one another."

Wouldn't it be great if people in Great Falls were moved to say, "See those people from Peace Lutheran Church -- how they love one another,"? Wouldn't it be great if one of your friends were to come up to you and say, "I see how you are always helping people, serving in the community, and doing lots of good. Why do you do that? What makes you so different?" And wouldn't it be great if, instead of "hem-hawing" around, you were able to respond by telling them about the love of Jesus Christ that you have experienced and which you would like them to experience? The Holy Spirit can indeed work in you, not only to show the love of God through acts of charity, but also to respond with your own testimony of faith.

The main thing is always to make sure that you keep the main thing the main thing. Sometimes that's difficult to do because we are not really that proud of the main thing. I remember about 30 years ago when there was an effort to rename certain jobs because people didn't feel "the main thing" was all that important or glamorous. "Garbage men" were renamed "sanitation engineers", housewives were renamed "domestic engineers", and so on. As Christians, we may not feel so proud or excited about "the main thing" which we have to do. Instead, we may look for charitable activities where we can see immediate results and feel good ourselves about doing them. Don't give in to that temptation.

We have been given the privilege of sharing something that will do far more than fill a hungry stomach or pay a monetary debt. We have received new life from God through the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of everlasting life. That message -- that Gospel -- is the most important thing that one could ever receive. As Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Sharing that message is what we are all about. It is the main thing for the Christian Church and this congregation. So, in all that we as a congregation and as individual Christians do, let's make sure that the main thing is always to make sure that you keep the main thing the main thing. Amen