A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach
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Isaiah 40:21-31, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

It’s easy to miss in the passage we just heard from the Gospel of Mark. We learn about Simon’s mother-in-law who is sick in bed with a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand and heals her. That evening, more who are ill are brought to Jesus and he heals them, also. The next morning, Jesus goes out alone to pray. But, the disciples find him and tell him that many people are searching for him. So, they travel on into the neighboring villages to proclaim the Good News. We almost miss it, but it’s there, between the healings in the evening and the travelling on in the morning. We hear: “[Jesus] cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. What is that about? Impact. It’s about motivating us, about stirring our souls to discipleship, to wanting to be disciples. Let’s take a look.

Secrecy is a theme throughout the first half of the Gospel of Mark. In the miracle stories, Jesus tells the demons, the faithful petitioners, and the disciples not to tell about the healing they have either experienced or witnessed. Through Jesus’ parables, Mark promotes the secrecy theme. Essentially, parables are secrecy before revelation, unclear at first. Parables require us to grapple with an idea, to ponder and question and discuss in order to assimilate the message – secrecy before revelation. In the healing stories, Jesus moves away from the crowds before he heals. Before he cures the deaf man (7:33), he takes him aside in private. Before he cures the blind man (8:23), he leads him out of the village. Secrecy is a theme throughout the first half of the Gospel of Mark. However, when Jesus and the disciples journey toward Jerusalem near the end of Jesus’ life, the transition begins and with Jesus’ bold, triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the secrecy is lifted.
Going right along with this theme of secrecy in the first half of Gospel is the characterization of the disciples as rather clueless; time and again they simply don’t get what Jesus is trying to tell them. They started out so eager: Simon and his brother Andrew dropped their nets and followed Jesus. James and his brother John were in a boat with their father mending nets. They took off and followed, leaving their father behind. Levi walked away from the tax booth and followed. So eager, and yet, so befuddled. They don’t understand the parable of the sower, the meaning of the seed falling on the surface of the path or on rocky ground or among thorns vs. being planted into good soil. They don’t understand when Jesus talks about the yeast of the Pharisees, the decay or the poor influence of the Pharisees. Instead, the disciples think they are being scolded for not having any bread. Even with the Transfiguration, when Jesus brings Peter, James and John up the mountain and his clothes become dazzling white, Peter does not recognize Jesus’ divinity and, confusedly, offers to build a shelter.

So, we have secrecy alongside clueless disciples. But, finally, the disciples get it. Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest. Jesus is inside on trial, with the chief priests, the elders and the scribes seeking testimony against him. Out in the courtyard, as predicted, Peter denies Jesus “three times before the cock crowed twice” (14:72). And then…and then, he wept. He repented. We know that Peter will see Jesus again, after the resurrection, in Galilee. So, there is repentance and forgiveness; there is promise and hope. The impact of this message is magnified by the unveiling of secrecy into the light of Jesus as God’s Beloved Son. The secrecy is lifted. The disciples get clarity. The message is clear and profound: the Good News is the best news. We are loved and God lives with us. Most important about what Mark is trying to achieve through this Gospel…the reader, the listener, us…we identify with the disciples. We want to have faith, but we are beset with fears and earthly cares just like the disciples. But, if the disciples can come around, and though betrayed by them, Jesus returns to them, then we know we can move from fear
to faith, from confusion to clarity; we can be disciples.

The very first verse of the Gospel of Mark is “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In other words, the ministry of Jesus living among us is just the beginning. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples went out into various communities and shared the Good News. Now, we have the opportunity to be authors in this enduring story by sharing our faith. Don’t we want for others to know what is good and life-sustaining and life-nurturing? At the Annual Meeting last week, I mentioned that word that scares us Episcopalians. Perhaps it makes you recoil. Perhaps you feel the hair on the back of your neck stand up…

**Evangelism.** And, here we are hosting the Evangelism Matters conference in March. So, it’s the perfect time to get comfortable with this word, with this action.

Evangelism is all about the joy in being inclusive, in radically welcoming the stranger and opening our hearts to being transformed by new life. The word scares us because we jump to the notion of converting people, conversion with a subversive, judgmental subtext of right vs. wrong. Evangelism in the Episcopal Church is not about triumphal conversion. And, it’s not about adding to our numbers for the sake of growth, the notion that bigger is better. Rather, we simply want for others what sustains and nurtures us through all of life: God’s love, comfort and inspiration. Someone who is unchurched might not have any idea what a faith community offers. Someone who is churched might be seeking a better fit with their faith perspective. As disciples, we share our faith in good faith, and, as disciples, we are ever-mindful of the gift in diversity.

What I love about the Episcopal faith is that we believe that God’s love is known through inclusivity, through justice and peace for all people, through respecting the dignity of every human being. So, we open our hearts and invite in the stranger and allow ourselves to be transformed, to understand and enjoy life more completely. Life only gets richer when we love more fully. Amen.