

Sunday, February 4, 2024
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Mark 1.29-39

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1064592491424377>

(Sermon begins at about 23:55)

“Model for Ministry”

Throughout our Epiphanytide journey, we have focused on the various ways that Jesus is manifest as the Son of God. This is primarily accomplished through the actions at the beginning of his public ministry. We first looked at the calling of his disciples to be partners in ministry, and those who will be charged with taking up this ministry after his death and resurrection. Exploring two accounts of this calling, each of which revealed something of who Jesus is as the Son of God, but also what it means to be a follower of Christ. And then last week, exploring Jesus’ first day on the job—the first day of his public ministry. Again, these actions of teaching, healing, and casting out demons in the synagogue providing greater insight into who Jesus is as the Son of God; to what his public ministry will be about, and what it means for us to be his companions in his ministry. In today’s Gospel reading, we continue with Jesus’ first day of public ministry, with what happens after the events at the synagogue. Here again, what we see continues to provide glimpses into how Jesus will more fully be revealed as the Son of God.

After the first action-packed day in the synagogue teaching and confronting demons, Jesus can’t just go home and relax. There is more work to be done. He immediately finds the mother-in-law of one of his disciples is sick and in need of healing. Which he provides. Apparently the news of this most recent healing has spread throughout Capernaum, as people from all over the city begin bringing those who are sick and possessed to him for healing. Alas, the work of the Messiah is never done. And the work he is doing is all about healing and restoration, about providing opportunities for new life. From the very beginning of his public ministry, providing insights into, even a foreshadowing of, the focus of his entire ministry. Indeed, the focus of his entire life and of his role as Messiah. One commentator sums up the events of this first day of Jesus’ public ministry and what it means in the following observation:

For Mark, this first day of ministry is a microcosm of Jesus’ mission as a whole: the Holy One of God comes to confront death-dealing forces for the sake of life-giving restoration. Jesus will be resurrected later in the story, but his life’s mission is all about resurrection (literally “standing again”) in the here and now. He comes near in order to lift us up into service, to reawaken us into dignity, community, and genuine health.¹

That last sentence is particularly telling: “He comes near in order to lift us up into service, to reawaken us into dignity, community, and genuine health.” That this first day of Jesus’ public ministry is not just about him. It is also about what we are to do as those who are healed and restored by him. It is about what we are to do as those who are brought into new life by and through him. While the story of Jesus’ first day on the job, it is also meant to be the model for our ministry. A model for our jobs as his followers, as members of the Body of Christ. Quite

appropriate for the day we hold our parish's annual meeting and celebrate the ministries of St. Gregory's and those who engage in those ministries.

This model for ministry begins in the synagogue—in the part of the story we heard last Sunday. An indication that our ministry obviously begins in our place of worship. It is here, in what we do on Sundays, that prepares us for ministry. I want to be very clear on this point, as it is the foundation for all that follows. What we do here on Sunday is not the totality of our ministry. It is just a small piece of ministry. Certainly, for some, like me as priest, for David our music director and organist, for our choir, for our lay eucharistic ministers and lectors, for our altar guild, what happens here on Sunday morning is a huge part of our own ministries. Providing a space for the rest of you to come and worship. The key purposes for what we do here on Sunday morning is threefold. The first purpose for our worship is to praise God. To give thanks for all God has provided us. The second purpose of our worship is to provide a space to learn about God and Christ, and what it truly means to be Christians. Which hopefully will inform each of us in our own discernment of how we are to more fully live into who God has created and called each of us to be. Part of this is also the communal aspect of parish life. In coming together, we create a community that can help in that discernment process. Beyond that, the community is also meant to support and nurture each of our parishioners in their own life of faith and their own ministries. The third purpose of our worship is the Eucharist, the holy meal in which we are fed with the Body and Blood of our Lord, providing us with the nourishment and the strength we need to walk out those doors and get back to the work of ministry. In fact, in the early church, when they still met in people's homes, after people received communion, rather than go back to their seats, rather than go to coffee hour, the faithful immediately walked out the door into the world. Having been fed with the Body and Blood of Christ, ready to continue their role as the Body of Christ.

Some ministry does indeed happen in this place. We have meetings and gatherings of various sorts. But generally, these are just in preparation for the real ministry. This building is merely home base for the real ministry of this parish—our ministry in the world. Not just the “official” ministries of St. Gregory's, like our food bank, Feed My Lambs, our various outreach projects. There are also the ministries each of you engage in in your day-to-day lives the other six days and 22 hours of the week when you are not in this place. Ministries that, while maybe not “official” ministries of St. Gregory's, are, nonetheless, your own personal ministries. Ministries that are no less valid, because they are ministries informed by who you are as a member of the Body of Christ, informed by what you discern in this place. This is reflected in where we pick up the Gospel story today” “After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue . . .” That's when the real ministry that Jesus and the disciples were engaged in actually began. Out in the world. In their homes, in their workplaces, in the streets, in public spaces.

At the end of today's pericope, Jesus says to his disciples: “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” In other words, there are plenty of opportunities for ministry in the world. There are plenty of needs in the world that can be met through our ministry, if we are open to looking for them. Which, really is not too hard. The opportunities are, indeed, all around us. In this exchange with his disciples, Jesus is really saying that one of the key aspects of ministry is to be open to new opportunities, to new possibilities. To not get bogged down in one place or in one activity. Not

that only engaging in one particular ministry is a bad thing. Not if it is one that provides a needed service. But there is always the possibility of getting in a rut. Of stagnating. Of burning out. The remedy for this—sometimes the best thing for a ministry—is to shake things up. To seek something new. To be open to where God might be calling you.

Hidden in the description of Jesus' ministry is a statement that is actually very important: "he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." This is one of those cryptic concepts that continually pops up in Mark's Gospel. What is known as the "Messianic Secret." Where Jesus, through statements he makes or through his actions, does not want anyone to know who he is. That he does not want anyone to know he is the Messiah. There is much debate among scholars as to the real purpose of this Messianic Secret. But for our purposes here, in exploring Jesus' actions as a model for our own ministry, the Messianic Secret applies to us, as well. Not that any of us are messiahs. If you are, please see me after church. No, as applied to us, this statement is really one of humility. That what we do by way of ministry is not for our own glorification, but to the glory of God. We are merely servants employed in a higher purpose.

And finally, something that we can—and often do—forget about ministry. Ministry is not just about doing the work. A key aspect of the model for ministry contained in today's Gospel reading is revealed in Jesus' actions after he has engaged in a long day of ministry—of healing and casting out demons. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." We can only keep it up for so long before we need a break. The work of ministry is challenging. It takes its toll, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. To continue to be effective in ministry, we need Sabbath times—times of rest and renewal. Times to recharge physically, mentally, and emotionally. And also, as in the verse just cited, times to recharge spiritually. We need to be sure to take time for prayer, meditation, and contemplation. Time to reconnect with God, who gives us the strength and the resources we need to engage in ministry in the first place. As we often say with respect to self-care—of which clergy are some of the worst at doing—if you don't take care of yourself, you're not going to be any good to anybody else. Which brings us full circle, back to the center of worship as the launching point for our ministries.

As we prepare for our annual meeting later this morning, as we review the "official" ministries our parish engaged in in 2023 and as we consider where we go in 2024, let us keep in mind these key principles of ministry that Jesus has modeled for us in his own actions. In so doing, we will be better able to faithfully live into who God has created us to be as members of the Body of Christ and who God has called us to be as St. Gregory's parish. As those who continually seek to be God's hands, God's feet, and God's heart in a world so in need to experiencing God's love.

¹ "What Freedom Is For: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany Week 5," SALT, January 29, 2024. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-lectionary-commentary-epiphany-5>