

The Problem Is Jesus

Earlier this week, some folks from our neighboring Methodist Church came by to talk story.

They are right at the edge of Mayor Wright, but so far have no ties at all to that community, and because their place is locked up tight from Monday through Saturday, they have experienced vandalism and other related problems.

They want to know what we're doing in and with our local community.

A bit later in the week, I heard from one of our sister churches that a request by AA to use their building for a weekly AA meeting met with vestry resistance because, and I quote: "They just aren't like us."

And finally, I had a talk with my agnostic brother who, in the course of our conversation, said that trusting in God is all well and good, but get real Dave; you've got to be in control of things!

And Jesus takes up cords and chains and moving quickly through the Temple, driving out those who have turned God into a commodity, driving out those who have turned God into something to be bought and sold, driving out those who turn God into something to be controlled and manipulated.

And the powers that be plot his death.

The problem for Christians in those days is the same problem we Christians face today.

The problem is Jesus.

Try as we will to sweeten him up; to make him say harmless sentimental niceties; try as we might to turn him into some kind of positive thinking guru or anything goes pal; Jesus keeps picking up cords, picking up chains, he keeps cleaning out the temple; whether that temple be in Jerusalem or in my heart or in this, our downtown community of Palama.

He calls us not to admire him but to follow him.

These past two weeks in Bible study we have watched the DVD of a wonderful actor who performs the entire Gospel of Mark, word for word.

The thing that struck many who saw this was how many places Jesus travelled to.

From time to time during the video, they would cut away to a map of Israel and trace the different places Jesus went.

He was everywhere, it seems, with all kinds of people; yet never staying long enough to rest on any laurels.

He is everywhere, it seems; but he is also hard to find.

After a long day of healing hundreds, Jesus goes out in the middle of the night to pray.

He finds a deserted place and there he prays.

The disciples angrily search for him and when they finally find him, practically scolding him for leaving the scene of so much healing, Jesus replies: "Let's go somewhere else!"

As much as they and we wish to put up buildings and put down roots, Jesus is on the move again, on to the next town, to

encounter the next group of nobodies; nobodies who are the saints of God.

The problem is Jesus.

We heard the Ten Commandments this morning.

The first five are about the right way to be in relationship with God.

The second five are about the way to be in right relationship with our neighbor.

John Calvin, the great reformer of long ago, speaks of the commandments as Mirror, Fence, and Guide.

Mirror to reflect myself back to myself, so that I may see I am not the spiritual giant I often imagine myself to be.

A Fence, so the community has guidelines to keep order and harmony in our common life together.

And Guide, since the commandments, rather than finger wagging admonitions, are, at their core, a roadmap of how we are intended to live, we who are images of God; we who are created to reflect the grace and love of God to all of creation.

We aren't accidents.

We are here to serve as God's emissaries to all that exists.

Sadly, we sometimes forget to remember the lofty calling to which we are each of us called; and now, deep in the season of lent, we are called once again, to remember.

The consequence of that remembering is not that we are to become rich in money or material things; not that we are to gain great power here and now; or even that we shall have control over our destinies, or our ministries, for that matter.

No, the consequence is that we shall become fools.

Because, once again, the problem is Jesus.

Anyone who stops and really thinks about who we are following will be driven to despair.

We follow a peasant Jew who, as a young man, managed to enrage enough of the good people of his time and enough of the governing authorities to end up on the ancient version of the electric chair.

This peasant Jew then appoints as his lead apostle to the outside world – the guy who carries the message that centuries later comes to us all the way in the middle of the vast Pacific – this fellow Paul – who can't speak well – who starts off his career killing followers of the Way – and who today – reaching out to his fledgling community at Corinth – a city a lot like New York – a city at the crossroads of major trade routes – a city full of sophisticates and intellectuals – Paul is ready to announce Jesus.

What can he possibly say?

“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to everyone else!” is what he says.

Notice what he doesn't say.

He doesn't proclaim Christ raised.

Oh that comes in other places.

But for Paul, for us, the central mystery of our faith is there, nailed to the cross.

The cross is where God chooses to reveal that the true God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the Almighty, omniscient, omnipresent God, is a vulnerable God, a suffering God, a God who will die rather than kill.

It is into this life that Jesus invites us to follow.

It's where letting go comes from.

It's where giving up in order to receive comes from.

It's where dying to self in order to find oneself comes from.

And if we sign on, it is a life that will take us not only into public housing projects and inviting AA folks to use our place; it will take us into manners of life where control is surrendered, and trust is, one day at a time, placed in the bloodied hands of a Jewish peasant.

I learned the other day that some of our youngsters, and particularly a few who give many of us the most heartburn, live with 15 people in 500 square feet of concrete block just across the street.

The kids sleep on sheets put down over the bare concrete floors.

On nights like we've had lately, the concrete gets really cold.

A couple of angels found out about this, and went out for some rugs so the children could sleep on something warm at night.

Some of the children didn't make it to church last week, because they were so happy to lay on the warm carpeted floor for the first time in years.

Because we have signed on with the problem who is Jesus, we get to be part of miracles like this, because we have signed on with the problem who is Jesus, we too can become a problem like Jesus: healing the sick, feeding the hungry; and living lives that welcome all who come; leaving the control, and the results, to God.