

He Got Up and Went Out to A Deserted Place

February 8, 2009 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Lectionary citation

Isaiah 40:21- 31

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

With the support of this congregation, I have started my first course at Eden Seminary, an on-line course on the Old Testament that I am taking over the Internet. As I have started reading the textbooks and listening to the lectures, I quickly realized that, I have a lot to learn about the Bible. At the same time, I am learning how our seminaries currently approach the Bible, and I hope to understand better the role that the seminaries play in building up the Church.

I will not go into details, but one of the themes of the class is that up until the 1980s, academics broadly agreed on how the Old Testament came about, including some ideas on who wrote it, when it was written, and why it was written. However, since then, this consensus has completely broken down and there is currently no accepted view of the origin of the Old Testament. Instead, there are a range of competing and contradictory hypothesis and theories. Our academic community is no longer defined by a shared view of the Old Testament. There is not even agreement on what are the appropriate tools and methods that should be used to study the Bible. It is clear that the breakdown of the consensus view of the Old Testament has been a loss. Although research and discussion goes on, participants are frequently unable to connect because they are speaking different languages. This is even true within the limited spectrum of views represented in a progressive seminary like Eden. It reminds me of the story of the Tower of Babel.

The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." (Genesis 11:7)

Therefore, if Eden Seminary is not defined by a shared view of the Bible, what defines it? This is the same question we can ask of our denomination and congregation, since who we are, is not defined by commitment to a creed or list of theological beliefs. There are many advantages to our not being a creedal denomination. However, the disadvantage is that our Christian identity is associated with things like traditions of worship, the history of our congregations and institutions, the ethnic background of our

members, and our positions on hot-button social issues rather than a set of theological principles. The problem with identifying ourselves by such cultural factors is that as the culture changes, what were once strengths quickly become weaknesses. The old creeds and confessions, by contrast, never go stale to the extent they are founded on God's eternal Word. However, although we remain a non-creedal denomination, the UCC leadership has made some effort define our brand of Christianity by slogans like "God is still speaking" and statements like the six vital themes: (1) We are People of God's Extravagant Welcome, (2) We Belong to Christ, (3) We Are a People of Covenant a United and Uniting Church, (4) We Are One at Baptism and the Table, (5) We Thank God by Working for a Just and Loving World, and (6) We Listen for the Still-speaking God.

We are the UCC because we belong to Christ and we listen to the "still speaking God," it sounds so simple and it should bring us together. However, although almost all of us in the UCC are united in acknowledging the centrality of Christ in the life of the church, there is a definite split between those who mainly seek Christ in the Bible and those who seek Christ in their private spiritual experience. Is the living Christ to be found in his living word, the Bible, or is the Bible merely a historically and culturally limited starting place for discerning God's will in today's world? This is where the slogan of the "still speaking God" both unites and divides us. I personally experience the "still speaking God" through the living Word of his authoritative scriptures, the Bible. I speak to God in prayer, but I listen to God through the Bible. When I want to hear what Jesus is saying, I open the Good Book. A quite different interpretation of the "still speaking God" is that the Bible records the personal spiritual experiences of folks long ago, the same type of spiritual experiences I can have myself. The experience of God recorded in the Bible is not special or authoritative and reflects the human limitations and shortcomings of those who recorded it.

I am obviously not a good advocate this second approach. I much prefer the Jesus of the Bible to the Jesus of my imagination! What frustrates me about the folks that always want to go beyond the Bible is that going deeper into the Bible, experienced as the authoritative Word of God, yields inexhaustible spiritual riches. Today's Gospel reading, which at first seems so simple and brief, is a good case in point. In Jesus' actions during a single day, we see the whole pattern of the life of the Church. We see the building of a community that incorporates the family, but goes beyond the family. Jesus is willing to use house of the brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, as a base of operations, but he brings along the other brothers, James and John. Jesus and his Gospel can never be limited to a single family, town, or nation.

We see that Jesus preaches in the synagogue, but he also heals at home and in the street. He heals on the Sabbath, the time reserved for preaching and praying, because healing is Jesus' way of demonstrating God's power. Holiness for Jesus is not in separating God from life, but bringing God into life, including the tough part of life such as illness. When he heals, his purpose is not to restore the body, but to restore the healed person to their proper place in the community. Although we now look to the medical community to heal the body, there is plenty of this kind of restorative healing left for the Church to do.

We see that Jesus heals everyone who comes to them and does not require that they first understand his message. At sundown, when the Sabbath was over, the people of the town bring all the sick and demon possessed to Jesus for healing. It is important to note that the people are unwilling to involve themselves with Jesus' controversial project of healing on the Sabbath. Instead, they wait until it is safe and legal to bring the sick to Jesus. This is a clear indication that they did not understand the purpose of Jesus' healing. They were not concerned with his message about the Kingdom of God; they just wanted their health problems fixed.

We see that Jesus sees that preaching and healing are not complete without praying. Even though the people do not understand what Jesus is doing, Jesus does not object and he apparently spends the night healing whomever come to the door of Simon's house. However, in the wee hours of the morning, he slips away to pray in a deserted place. Jesus is God, but he also the Son of God, and he prays to his Father. One commentator said that Jesus' ministry is best defined as "Preaching and healing. Healing and preaching. This represents the ministry of Jesus in a nutshell, and it represents still the ministry of those who follow him." For whatever reason, this author left out the praying. "Preaching and healing and praying. Praying and healing and preaching," would be a more accurate description Jesus' ministry. If a Church just preaches and heals, but never prays, it is not really the Church.

The Gospel next presents us with a classic Simon Peter moment. In Mark, Simon Peter along with the other disciples stands in for us, in that he always misunderstood what Jesus was doing. Here, Simon Peter does not understand why Jesus does not want to stay in Capernaum, living with Simon's family and healing his friends and neighbors. Simon Peter tends to think that whatever Jesus is doing right now, especially if it is successful and popular, represents the destination of the Church. However, Jesus keeps showing Simon Peter that today's ministry just prepares us for the next step in the journey. This was true at the transfiguration, when Simon Peter thought they should stay on the holy mountain. It was true when Simon Peter said "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" when Jesus told him about the cross (Matthew 16:22). It was true after the resurrection when Simon Peter struggled with the idea that the Church was for all people, not just for the Children of Israel. Like Peter, we must see that the Gospel is Jesus' Good News only if it is shared to a wider and wider circle of people.

Jesus has made it quite clear what we are to do, "Preaching and healing and praying. Praying and healing and preaching." Moreover, not just in with our family, friends, and neighbors of our home community, but in all the neighboring towns. For a Christian, spreading the Gospel is not a choice. As Paul puts it in today's Epistle, we are compelled to preach. In addition, if we are compelled to preach, we are compelled to remove all the barriers that make us ineffective at spreading the Gospel. Anything in our personal lives, congregation, and denomination that is an obstacle to spreading the Gospel must be cast away. Like Paul, we must become all things to all people so that by all possible means we might save some. We do all this for the sake of the gospel that we may share in its blessings. Amen.

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