

LET'S NOT FORGET THE MISSION

We're living in DIFFICULT economic times, but we need to be GRATEFUL that we're NOT living in a time like the *Great Depression* of the 1930's. My parents and grandparents lived through the *Great Depression*, as some of YOU did. And though I didn't EXPERIENCE it, I HAVE heard lots of STORIES about it. It was a HORRENDOUS time! It was a SOUL-KILLING time. It was a time when MEN were without JOBS (and I say MEN because THAT was MOST of the workforce). It was a time when FAMILIES were without INCOME, and FORECLOSURES were PLENTIFUL! And MANY families had to just stand by HELPLESSLY, as their HOME, their farm equipment and often their FURNITURE were AUCTIONED off.

Well, DURING that dreadful time, SOME men rode the RAILS, hitchhiking in BOX cars, to try to find a BETTER place to BE. They were called HOBOES! And WHEN they got to a new TOWN, they would KNOCK on people's DOORS asking for FOOD. MANY, of course, turned them AWAY. OTHERS refused to answer the door. But, there were always SOME who OPENED their doors and gave them FOOD, water, and maybe even a clean SHIRT. And I'm told that, IF you were ONE of those people who gave FOOD to the hoboes, they would MARK your FENCE, or your TREE, in order to TELL their COMRADES: *THIS is a FRIENDLY house! The people in THIS house will GIVE you something to EAT.*

Well, I like to THINK that I would get one of those MARKS on MY fence, that I would be someone who would FEED those hungry HOBOES. To ME, that mark on my fence would be a badge of HONOR! The PROBLEM, of course, is that a MARK like that would bring LOTS and LOTS of hoboes to my door, looking for a HAND-OUT. And I SUSPECT that even if I had plenty to GIVE, I would get pretty TIRED of it after awhile. I would get *compassion FATIGUE*.

Well, one of the things about being a big, VISIBLE church in the center of town is that we get LOTS of people coming HERE asking for HELP and HAND-OUTS. And I'm working very HARD in my ministry to build NETWORKS in our Keene COMMUNITY with people and organizations, SO that I can really HELP people in NEED. In the past, I've helped people get JOBS. I've helped people get MEDICAL attention. I've helped people fight ADDICTIONS. I've helped people find CARS and HOUSING. I've helped people pay BILLS. I've helped LOTS of people through the years! But a few years ago, I went through a period when the DEMAND was just too HIGH! It was taking too much of my TIME, and I found myself very AGGRAVATED with it, and LESS than patient with people in need.

Well, I THOUGHT about that period as I read our Scripture Lesson for today. JESUS, here, has the SAME problem, only much BIGGER. You see: when people found out that Jesus could HEAL the sick, they came to Him in DROVES. And Jesus didn't seem to MIND healing the SICK. In fact, I suspect He rather ENJOYED it! He ENJOYED giving people new LIFE! However, He had OTHER things to DO, and NOT much TIME. HE was on a man on a MISSION! He just couldn't SPEND all of His TIME healing the SICK and the BROKEN. And in our Scripture Lesson today, so MANY people have come to Him for HEALING that He FINALLY has to get AWAY. SO, He goes off ALONE to pray. And His disciples get UPSET with Him for LEAVING all those SICK people. In fact, they TRY to make Him RETURN to Capernaum to HELP the crowds. But JESUS will have NONE of it. He says: *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* (Mark 1:38).

You see: Jesus HAS to set PRIORITIES! HE has important WORK to do, and the CROWDS are getting in the WAY! HE has come to PREACH, but THEY just want to be HEALED. HE has come to establish God's KINGDOM, God's REIGN, but THEY are taking up His time with LESSER things. And He feels His time slipping AWAY, knowing that He NEEDS to be doing GOD'S business! And so, Jesus STRUGGLES with it all.

Well, friends, it's into THIS tension that the LEPER comes to Jesus, asking for HEALING. And we can CERTAINLY understand the LEPER'S point-of-view. This disease had RUINED his life! It's eating away at his body! He can no longer live in the community! He can't support his family! And he can HARDLY beg enough FOOD to get him through the DAY! *PLEASE, Jesus, HELP me!* he shouts, *IF you choose to, you can HEAL me! I beg you, Jesus: GIVE me my LIFE back!* And Mark says that Jesus was MOVED with PITY. Of COURSE, He was moved with PITY. Who WOULDN'T pity a LEPER? Lepers were called *the living dead* in those days. Lepers were FORCED to live AWAY from people, so that they wouldn't INFECT people. When someone was walking TOWARD a leper, he or she had to shout: *Unclean, unclean!* And in time, they would DIE, very often totally ALONE. SO, of COURSE He was moved with PITY! HOWEVER, only SOME of the early Greek manuscripts of Mark's gospel SAY that Jesus was moved with PITY. OTHER early manuscripts say that Jesus became ANGRY! WOW! What a DIFFERENCE! So, which IS it? PITY or ANGER?

Well, when scholars try to figure out ANSWERS to questions like this, they follow certain principles. And ONE principle is to favor the more DIFFICULT reading. And the REASON for that is SIMPLE. They didn't have MASS printing, so EARLY manuscripts had to be HAND-copied, usually by MONKS. And a monk copying a manuscript which says that Jesus is ANGRY at a LEPER might well be tempted to CHANGE it and make it say that Jesus is moved with PITY, so that Jesus is more LIKEABLE. But, WHO would change it the OTHER way, from pity to anger? NO one! Well, IF we FOLLOW this PRINCIPLE, then perhaps Jesus IS angry here. ALSO in the original Greek are two OTHER angry-sounding words. BOTH of them come AFTER Jesus heals the leper. Mark tells us that Jesus *sternly warns* the leper NOT to SAY anything (v. 43). Well, in the original Greek, the word for *sternly warns* is an ANGRY word. And THEN, Mark tells us that Jesus *sends him away* (v. 43). And again, the GREEK word for *sends him away* is an ANGRY word, which literally means that Jesus *DRIVES him OUT*.

And therefore, the MORE I study this story, the MORE I think that Jesus IS angry here. After all, HE'S trying to do the work He's been SENT to do, but the CROWDS keep DISTRACTING Him. And when He FINALLY manages to ESCAPE the crowds, this LEPER shows up, BEGGING and PLEADING. And he's such a PITIFUL creature! And while Jesus MUST be moved with PITY, He ALSO must be ANGRY, because He's being DISTRACTED again. And while Jesus KNOWS that He can easily HEAL this guy, He ALSO knows that IF He DOES heal him, the story is BOUND to get around, and the CROWDS will become even MORE consuming. So YES, Jesus is ANGRY -- NOT at the LEPER, but at the SITUATION. On the ONE hand, He wants to HELP this poor guy; but on the OTHER hand, He wants to get ON with His MISSION. And He CAN'T do BOTH! He HAS to CHOOSE! So He's TORN! He's FRUSTRATED! Well of COURSE, Jesus HEALS the leper! And THEN, He tells him to keep QUIET about it! **Yah, RIGHT! Like THAT'S going to happen!** Of COURSE, the leper goes out and tells EVERYBODY! (*CELEBRATE! CELEBRATE!*) And it's *DEJA VU* all over again, with crowds EVERYWHERE! Oh, it must have been SO frustrating for Jesus!

Well, WE in the CHURCH have the SAME problem TODAY, don't we? We NEED to be doing a thousand things -- from FEEDING the hungry to creating lots of programs for people

to going on MISSION trips to keeping up our FACILITY. BUT, even though ALL of these things are IMPORTANT, we CANNOT let them distract us from our PRIMARY task, which is the SAME one that JESUS had. After all: WE are called to be His BODY! WE are called to be HIS hands and voice in TODAY -- DOING and SAYING what HE would do and say if HE were here in the FLESH. SO, HIS mission is OUR mission! And AS it says in verse 38, HIS mission is to PROCLAIM the message! HIS mission is to PREACH the Good News. And HIS mission for US is the SAME: to go forth into ALL the world and MAKE disciples, BAPTIZING them and TEACHING them, JUST as He commissioned His FIRST disciples to DO at the end of Matthew's gospel (Matthew 28:19-20)! Yes, that's OUR mission as well! In fact, ISN'T it the ONLY thing that WE really have to offer this world that nobody ELSE in our society HAS. LOTS of people and organizations feed the hungry and help the poor. LOTS of groups enjoy fellowshiping with one another! LOTS of organizations maintain BUILDINGS and offer MISSION trips. But ONLY the CHURCH has the Good NEWS of Jesus Christ and the KINGDOM of God to proclaim. And THEREFORE, WE need to be DOING it. WE need to be OUT there making MORE and better disciples. It's called EVANGELISM, a WORD we don't USE very often in THIS church. But it IS one reason we EXIST. And therefore, we need to CONTINUALLY be proclaiming the GOOD NEWS and making MORE and better disciples!

But it's NOT easy, IS it? It makes us feel UNCOMFORTABLE! At least it does ME! It's MUCH easier just to get SO caught up in whatever we're DOING, maybe even in doing good DEEDS which help LOTS of people, that we FORGET that one of our PRIMARY purposes is to PROCLAIM the Good News and make MORE and BETTER disciples. It's MUCH easier just to DO the WORK and NOT talk about WHY we DO it. In fact, I sometimes think that WE even forget WHY we do it. But, it's IMPORTANT! I remember starting a CHILDREN'S sermon one day by saying to the kids: *I will say a WORD, and I'd like YOU to respond by saying the FIRST word that comes into your mind. Are you ready?* And the kids all said: *Yes.* SO, I said: *FROG!* And one little boy shouted out: *JESUS!* So I said: *Johnny, WHY did you say JESUS when I said FROG?* And Johnny said: *Because I KNOW that you didn't bring us UP here to talk about FROGS.* And of course, little Johnny was RIGHT! Even as YOUNG as he WAS, he KNEW what the church is ABOUT. He KNEW that the preacher OUGHT to be talking about JESUS. He KNEW that the church's PRIMARY responsibility is to TELL the story and SHARE the Good News! But MOST of us are NOT comfortable doing it, ARE we? It's HARD when we live in a culture where we're DISCOURAGED from talking about our FAITH. We CAN'T do it at WORK. We CAN'T do it in SCHOOL. We CAN'T do it anywhere! The "IN your FACE" Christians have made EVANGELISM a BAD word these days, haven't they? But STILL, WE are called to DO it. SO, my QUESTION is: *HOW do we do it in ways that is NOT threatening to people, and are NOT considered "in your FACE", but ways that will WORK?* It's a tough question, isn't it? And quite frankly, I don't know the ANSWER.

So I'D like you to do some HOMEWORK. Help me STRUGGLE with this issue. THINK about it! PRAY about it! TALK about it in your various groups and committees, or at coffee hour. And together, LET'S figure out some STEPS that WE can take as a church that will make our church MORE effective at fulfilling THIS part of our mission, MORE effective at EVANGELISM, MORE effective at proclaiming the GOOD News of Jesus Christ, and making MORE and BETTER disciples and advancing God's KINGDOM. Yes, LET'S work on it TOGETHER. And please let me know your SUGGESTIONS, because it's an EXTREMELY important issue for the church, both THIS church and the WIDER church. SO, let's be CREATIVE about it, and give it some good THOUGHT, prayer and discussion. Thanks! Amen.