

SERMON: 4th Sunday after the Epiphany 2015

Introduction

If you were to ask people on the street today what day it is, what do you think they would say? “Super Bowl Sunday!” And they would be right.

How many people do you think would answer, “Why it’s the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, of course!” Not too many I daresay.

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But here we are, in church on Sunday, on the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany in the Year of Our Lord, 2015. Can we reconcile the Super Bowl, the Seattle Sea Hawks, the New England Patriots, and Katy Parry with the Gospel of Mark, temple teaching, unclean spirits and Jesus?

Well, we’d better because this is the world in which we live. We are 21st century Christians who live in a completely different world than did Jesus or the first Gospel writer, Mark. The scene depicted in Mark’s Gospel shows Jesus and his followers walking to Capernaum and settling there for a while. It is a far, far cry from the cyber worlds which we inhabit or for that matter, a far, far cry from the seaside coastal life we live and love.

Is this a problem or an obstacle to knowing and loving Christ? Not at all.

Is it a challenge to relate this Jesus we hear about with the life and style lived by us? Yes, I would say it is. But we have opportunities to yoke Christ and everyday life together, even in this century!

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Bringing the Jesus of old to the present of now is one of our spiritual challenges. This has been the case ever since Christianity grew and began to spread in areas and eras very different from 1st century Palestine.

Present times, however, do seem to present unprecedented challenges to honoring and living the Christian life. I say this because there are so many unchurched families and individuals for whom this phenomena of “church” is just as foreign as a foreign language. And I do not exaggerate.

This is one primary theological reasons why I believe it is so important to have events hosted by our churches which bring the general public onto our grounds, if not into our sanctuary. The White Elephant Sale is a perfect example of members of this church extending themselves to the world around us. The sale brings in people to help set up the sale, to donate items for sale and work at the sale. The fact that roughly half the proceeds go to helping the world around us, far and near, cements its value. The other half goes to providing essential assistance to help make the church function. And just think of how the buyer with little means is tangibly served by being able to purchase good things not otherwise possible.

Other outstanding examples of bringing the general public onto the grounds of the Church is the marvelous *St. James Music Series* and all the other performing arts groups who use our facilities, the *Visual Arts* exhibitions, and the *Church and the World Adult Education* programs in which the Jew and Gentile, the Atheist and Agnostic, the Seeker and the Lost join us for fellowship and learning opportunities.

Just the title, *Open Doors*, the fall program in which we collaborate with our cultural zone neighbors to literally open our doors for visitors, says it all. Open Doors, indeed. We also welcome AA to our space weekly.

These examples are specific ones which make manifest the presence of Christ in our midst—here in the 21st Century. Christ, above all, would welcome everyone—everyone—to our church home and facilities. As long as we remember this in the way we allocate our budgets, our time and our

space, we can be assured that we are living the Gospel in these discrete, specific ways.

Of course there are countless ways of living out the Gospel, but today I highlight those ministries which literally open our doors and say, “Come on in...we are glad you are here.” No litmus tests at the door. Just come in.

Season after the Epiphany

The season after the Epiphany is all about making the existence and message of God through Christ made known. *God made Manifest* is the time honored way of talking about the Epiphany. God revealed in Christ. *God Made Manifest*. Present. Present not only to the Jews of Jesus’ time, but to the non-Jews, otherwise known as Gentiles.

For those of you coming to Dr. John Huber’s Wednesday evening talks, you know that the first church council was riveted on the question of who was allowed to be in the group which followed the teachings of Jesus. This is so hard to imagine in our day and time, but around 50 AD, at the Council of Jerusalem, it was the most serious and divisive issue in the newly emerging church.

Did Jesus come to bring only Jews into the Kingdom or did he come to bring all—even Gentiles—into the Kingdom? That was the question. After much consternation and prayer, finally Holy Wisdom prevailed and the church proceeded in its development with both Jews and Gentiles partaking in the life of the church, following the Christ.

Epiphany. That was a crucial epiphany-- God in Christ came for all. Jesus was the Messiah not only for the Jews who had longed for a savior, but also he extended his loving embrace to all women and men and little children as well.

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Church of England

Lucy Kellaway, a delightful columnist with the *Financial Times*, wrote a piece on January 5 of this year about the most irritating new phrases uttered by business people in 2014. She awarded the 2014 Golden Flannel of the Year awards to the following words and phrases:

Reach out, lean in, push back, space, learnings, content and passionate .

Then she wrote, and I quote, “This year I’m awarding a special prize to an organization that ought to have risen above jargon, but has been dragged down into it. Winner of the inaugural Fallen Angel award goes to the Church of England, which in a paper on training bishops talked of

...a radical step change in our development of leaders who can shape and articulate a compelling vision and who are skilled and robust enough to create spaces of safe uncertainty in which the Kingdom grows.

[Grone]

Kellaway concluded: “Our Lord, looking down on a sentence in which His Kingdom was obliterated by a dozen dreary management clichés, must have found his genius for forgiveness sorely tested.”

[I wonder who leaked that document to her?]

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Humor aside, I share this example of the Church somehow failing to communicate her own unique calling as a spiritual beacon in the world, based upon the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of the World. This message is pertinent to St. James as it makes known her identity and states what kind of leader she wants in the next rector.

The church can only be truly relevant to the world if she is true to her unique calling. The church can only be faithful to our Lord by claiming the call to worship the Triune God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Thank you, Lucy Kellaway, for calling out our Church in this instance of clichéd secularism.

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The Lord is With Us

Lastly, I hope we remember that the Jesus we read about in Holy Scripture is the same Lord who still heals, forgives and loves us. When we hear the story of Jesus driving out an unclean spirit when he was in Capernaum at the beginning of his ministry, as depicted in the Gospel of Mark, we can be assured that this same Lord is with us.

Perhaps we miss the drama of the scene depicted, and I hope we do, but each of us has that which needs to be “cleaned out” spiritually. Invite the Lord to take action with you, to heal you in body, mind and soul.

Through the communication of prayer to God, you and I can be renewed and healed and empowered to go forward in our spiritual quest to love and serve the Lord.

Amen

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