



“Worthiness”

Text: Mark 2:1-22

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

One of the truths I’ve uncovered in this business of preaching is that everything that should be said, has been said, and it has been said in a better way than I could ever hope to say it. Tremendously complex ideas are compacted into a brief, pithy statement that completely encapsulates the original idea, but in a way so perfectly simple that it nearly defies understanding how anyone could accomplish such a feat. Too many are blessed with the capacity for writing a long sentence (take any 20th century German theologian for example). But blessed are those who can say something powerful with an economy of words.

Case in point. Here is a statement I first heard long ago, but it no less true today. “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.” Massive volumes have been written on the subject of ecclesiology - the study of the church. A galaxy of sermons have been preached on the matter. Phenomenal church fights have taken place over the matter. But, there it is: “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.”

Who said it? There is no definitive answer. Among those suggested are Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, American Methodist Episcopal minister, Rev. L.L. Nash, St. Gregory the Theologian, and Abigail Van Buren, of “Dear Abby” fame. Go ahead and add Will Rogers and Mark Twain to the list. What could it hurt?

We will probably never know who said it: “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.” And I don’t suppose we need to. It is sage wisdom. It is keen insight. And there is something distinctively faith-based about the statement. “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.”

The Gospel of Mark begins “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” And what is the good news? “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” (Mark 1:15 CEB) Jesus comes to change hearts, to change minds, and to change lives with the good news of God’s abiding and never-ending love.

And where does Jesus start? Jesus begins, according to Mark’s gospel, by casting out demons, healing Peter’s mother-in-law, healing a leper, and this week Jesus heals a paralyzed man, calls a despised tax collector to be a disciple, and shares a dinner with a group of tax collectors and other unscrupulous people. Jesus’ interaction with such people draws harsh criticism. “How can such a fellow forgive sins?” the religious leaders asked at the healing of the paralyzed man. “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” the critics asked while Jesus attending the dinner party at Levi’s house. “Why is it that he and his disciples do not fast?” the question becomes.

It was all a little too common. It was all a little too low-brow. It was a little too déclassé. Religious folk simply do not do those kind of things.

Right smack in the middle of our passage for the morning is a verse that jumps off the page. It condenses Jesus ministry and mission into one concise statement. Jesus said:

Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do.

I didn’t come to call righteous people, but sinners. (Mark 1:17 CEB)

Jesus didn’t come among us to establish a club where all the “good” people and the “nice” people and the “right” people would feel at home. Jesus didn’t walk this planet to further cushion the lives of those who felt justified in everything they did, whether it was right or wrong. Jesus’ message wasn’t directed at those who already had enough and more.

Jesus came speaking hope to those who had little or nothing. Jesus came to bring wholeness to those whose lives were fractured in body, mind, or spirit. Jesus came to bring a new beginning and a fresh start to those imprisoned in the past.

Jesus had no prerequisites. Jesus had no pre-requirements in order to offer care and understanding. Jesus expected nothing from those who saw him and listened to him and received his touch.

What Jesus had he freely gave. Sometimes it was a healing touch. Sometimes it was a good word. Sometimes it was an invitation to a new life. Sometimes it was simply paying attention to one who was routinely ignored. And sometimes it was breaking through the walls that the world - that the society - had erected to keep some people in and to keep others out.

“The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.”

I was visiting a church that was experiencing a decline in vitality. I invited them to tell me about their history. “At one time,” one of the church leaders proudly told me, “we had the president of the steel company, the clerk of the works, two bank presidents, the superintendent of schools, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals and business owners.” “Oh,” I said. Then the cat slipped out of the bag. The church leader said, “We need to get back to that.”

Diagnosis? Their church had become a museum for saints, or at least a comfortable club for those who had the capacity to keep everything running smoothly. There didn’t seem to be much of a desire to be a “hospital for sinners.” I’m not sure they would have known what to do with an influx of those who had been battered and bruised and beaten down by life.

When the church is at its best, it is reaching out to minister to those in need of every kind. When the church is at its best, it is embodying Jesus’ instinctive welcoming outreach to all. When the church is at its best, it is discovering need and implementing ways of meeting the need. When the church is at its best, it intuitively cares more for others than it cares for self. When the church is at its very best, the world can catch a glimpse of Jesus’ very presence in its ministry and mission.

Throughout my ministry, I have encountered a rampant disease within the church. It infects everyone - girls, boys, women, and men. It is contracted by young and old, poor and rich, common and sophisticated. It’s not unique to the church, but that is where I most encounter it.

The condition is called “*accute non sum dignus*.” Translated from the Latin, it is a severe case of unworthiness. Its tell-tale signs include statements such as, “I’m not spiritual enough,” “I don’t know enough about the Bible,” and “I haven’t been a member for that long.” These statements, and many more, reveal the presence of the unworthiness virus. If left untreated, the virus can lead to a fatal loss of self-image, significant loneliness due to lack of community, a failure to thrive in the kingdom of God, a non-fulfillment of God-given potential, and it can even lead to the death of a church.

Unworthiness, in the church, is a failure to see that the church is “a hospital for sinners” and not a “museum for saints.”

When I was a young minister, there was an old, wise, country-pastor who took a liking to me. He was in a neighboring presbytery, so we could be a bit more honest with each other than if we were in the same presbytery. One day, we were solving all the problems of the world, and he looked at me and said, “You know what the definition of the church is, don’t you?” I said, “No, but you’re about to tell me.” He said, “the church is just a pack of sinners relying on grace.” Truer words were never spoken.

Friends, we are not worthy to be called the church. There is nothing in us, or about us, that makes it possible for us to lay claim to being God's own people. On our own, we are unworthy.

But, in Jesus Christ, God has called us God's own. The voice of God has constituted the church. The Spirit of God infuses and empowers the church. The foundation upon which we stand was laid by Jesus Christ. The proof of this is clear: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (1 John 33:1). We have been claimed by God, touched by Jesus Christ, and made one in the Spirit of God. We are worthy.

And, as we are reminded in that oft-quoted verse, God loves the world. That means that every person in the world - every single person breathing the breath of life today - every boy and girl, every woman and man - are worthy of being welcomed into the kingdom of God. No one is excluded from God's grace. No one is denied access to God's transforming love. No one is too sinful, no one has fallen too far, no one is beyond redemption.

And no one is to be denied. In the first story from our passage in Mark that we read, we heard of a paralyzed man's friends ripping off the roof tiles in order to let the man into Jesus' presence. I can think of no better image for the church's mission. We are called to remove all that blocks anyone from coming into the presence of God in Jesus Christ and, by his touch, empowering them to be made whole.

"The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." Let's not forget that. Not now and not forevermore. Amen.



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