

1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 29-39 “Measuring Up”

Sometimes it's difficult to evaluate progress in churches like ours. And when I mean “like ours,” I mean similar in size, average age, traditional more so than contemporary, mainline more so than evangelical ... that sort of thing. It's hard to evaluate because it often seems that the list of things we're *not* doing and the list of needs we're *not* meeting are always bigger than the list of what we *are* doing. Even big, well-resourced churches get overwhelmed with all the pressing needs around them and they think, “How in the world can we respond to all these needs in meaningful ways?” And I guess it doesn't help when we read things in the Bible like Emily just did where the Apostle Paul writes, “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.” When you read things like this, it's easy to start feeling ... inadequate.

“Oh, we're not doing much to offer support to people with drug or alcohol problems.” Or, “We don't do a whole lot when it comes to Bible study and discipleship groups.” Even our worship doesn't cater very well to young people or folks who are more ... “charismatic” as far as their preferred style of worship is concerned. If being all things to all people means providing something for everybody no matter what their needs, then we're not doing so hot. But maybe being “all things to all people” doesn't mean that at all. That's why I think our passage from Mark's gospel that Emily read earlier can offer some help here, because Jesus sure didn't seem very intent on providing everyone with what they were looking for. In fact when everyone started expecting him to do that he walked away and left town!

The story starts out well enough. Jesus heals Simon Peter's sick mother-in-law which, by the way, answers the question, “Was Peter married?” It adds weight to what Peter sacrificed when he just dropped everything to follow Jesus! But Mark presents this whole scene in such a matter-of-fact, unsensational way. It's only a couple of sentences! However, the news of this healing obviously got around town in a much more

sensational way because by the next verse the whole town is gathering on the doorstep. And they're bringing all these sick people with them! If Jesus was looking for an audience for his ministry he sure hit the jackpot. Instant success. All these people are flocking to his door ready for him to respond to their problems. And that's exactly what Jesus does. He responds to their needs by healing people of various illnesses and freeing others from demonic forces. All right Jesus! Now we're talking! This guy delivers! He's the man!

But what happens the next morning? Well the next morning the crowd on the doorstep is even bigger than the one of the night before. The problem is, Jesus is nowhere to be found! "All things to all people?" Seems like Jesus is being "nothing to nobody" here! So his disciples hunt him down and they find him praying in a quiet place outside of town. "Jesus! You came to proclaim a message and now you've got your biggest ever audience waiting to see you. What are you doing out here?" Jesus doesn't offer an explanation. He just says, "Welp ... I think it's about time we moved on to the next town so I can preach and heal there too. That's what I've come to do, so let's go." Judas Iscariot was probably thinking, "Wait ... we haven't even taken up an offering yet!"

It would be a bit like if someone from a local paper or TV station visited our church and did a feature story about us and the next Sunday we had a hundred new people show up for worship. But when it came time for the service, I'm nowhere to be found. And when you finally track me down over in Bidwell Park somewhere, I'd say, "I've been praying all night and I think we should close the church, move down to Durham and start all over again." I think Gary would be calling for the personnel committee to have a little "meeting" with me! After all the work we've put in trying to re-orient our church to reach out and become a more visible presence here in the local community, you don't just walk away the moment people begin to catch on and respond. So why did Jesus seem to do that?

Surely the answer is to be found in this early-morning prayer session

that Jesus had, but Mark doesn't give us any details about what went on! He just gives us the before and the after. So we never know exactly what went on between Jesus and God during that time! So that means we've got to exercise a bit of educated guesswork based on the way Mark puts this account together. Earlier in the chapter, Mark told us about how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan. Unlike Matthew and Luke, however, Mark doesn't give us any *specific* details about the temptations, but you wind up seeing them over and over in his account of Jesus' life and ministry. Everywhere Jesus went it was, "Come on Jesus. Do something spectacular! Feed these hungry people! Nothing wrong with that. Heal all the people of their diseases. Nothing wrong with that. Utilize your fame and popularity. Build an instant following by giving them *exactly what they want*. Think of all the good you'll be able to achieve when you're famous and popular! *Nothing* will be too much for you when you've got influence like that."

But Jesus turns his back and walks away. He's not after a pathway to success or fame or power. He knows that making these healings the number one feature about his ministry is the short cut to popularity. It's the sure-fire way to build a big following, to church growth, and to a healthy bank account. But I think he also knows that if he does that, he'll actually lose all chances of his message being taken *seriously*. He'll become just the dispensary of instant gratification for the needy multitudes and they'll flock to him to get their piece of whatever it is they're looking for. Then those folks will go out and tell others where all the "free stuff" is! And he can preach till he's blue in the face and they'll nod gratefully and maybe leave a bit ol' fat offering in the plate. After all, they'll have all the goodies they came for and they'll go out and bring other people in! If Jesus was after success and popularity this would be a *great* strategy. But if he was all about calling people to a life that seems absurd by the standards of this world, he'd be wasting his breath. Oh, but wait. That's exactly what he was doing.

So maybe when we get down on ourselves and start feeling like we're not attracting new people the way we'd like or that we're not measuring

up to all those “other” churches with their whiz-bang programs and ministries who seem to be drawing in the big crowds ... maybe then it’s time to head out to a deserted place to pray. Anyone with some basic social research skills can produce a needs profile for the local community and identify target groups and come up with products to offer. And you know what? If you’re doing it in response to prayerful discernment of the Spirit, fine. By all means, follow the path where God is calling you! But ... if you haven’t gone through that prayerful discernment, *be careful*. Because it might just be some clever plan for product placement and has nothing to do with the integrity of the gospel. Sure a family ministries model might attract more people with young children. Modern “praise and worship” music with a full band is a reasonably marketable commodity among the baby boomers and X-Generation, although that’s not as true as it was 10 years ago. We could go with a “coffeehouse” style or throw in a Celtic service now and then. Depends on the data you get from the needs profile, right?

But the reality is that we’re not actually going to hear God’s call simply by listing an inventory of the needs that we’re *not* meeting. That’s like saying that Jesus was discerning God’s call by asking the crowds at the door *what they wanted*. If we’re going to hear God above the competing cries of the world’s ever-present inventory of needs, we’re going to have to seek out a deserted place where we can meet God in the silence and stillness. And in that place of stillness, we’re going to have to let God strip us of our pride, re-work our thoughts and un-complicate our hearts. That’s when we’ll hear the difference between all the cries of, “Do this for me, do that for me,” and the whispering of the Holy Spirit. That’s where we’ll discover where our spirit-given gifts and graces for ministry meet the heart-felt needs of the community ... in a place where we don’t expect a fat return for our efforts. And it’s only there in those places of silence before God that we’re ever going to find the courage and strength to turn our backs and walk away from “easy popularity.”

And you know what? It may very well hurt to turn away and travel a

path of faithfulness and integrity. But it's only when we take this path that we'll discover the truth of the promise written in Isaiah 40:31 –

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

Jesus waited trustingly on God in a deserted place in the early hours of the morning. And *as* he waited, God showed him another way. Not the way of popularity and success, but the way of suffering that ran all the way to the cross. But Isaiah's promise held true. Jesus rose up with the breath of God's Spirit bearing him up like the wind beneath an eagle's wings.

We declare our faith around this table week after week and we share with Jesus in his broken body to remind ourselves that the voice of silence in the deserted places is calling us to the same path, and that if we too take the path of integrity we too will find ourselves raised up with the Spirit beneath our wings.