

Creating a Place for All to Worship
February 5, 2012 Epiphany 5A
Mark 1:29-39
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Today's gospel gives us a sense of Jesus' worship life. It comes on the heels of a very busy time for him. Jesus has gotten baptized in the River Jordan. He's been tempted for 40 days in the wilderness. He's called some fishermen to come and follow him. They've started traveling from village to village. Along the way, Jesus casts out a demon and his fame quickly begins to spread. Somehow, in the midst of all this busyness, Jesus takes the time to worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Our story today picks up where we left off last week. Jesus and his disciples are in Capernaum. It's the Sabbath. Worship in the synagogue has ended. They go to the home of Peter and Andrew, presumably for a little time with their small group. They soon discover that Peter's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. We don't know how serious the fever is, but evidently Jesus feels a need to do something about it. So he heals her, even though it's the Sabbath. Notice what happens next. Suddenly she hops out of bed and starts making them tuna fish sandwiches for lunch.

Now, I can guess what some of you progressively minded people are thinking: Weren't there any men to help with lunch? The answer is yes, but that's not the point of the story. In fact, the point is just the opposite. In the gospel of Mark, the twelve male disciples are often clueless about who Jesus is and what he is up to. It's the women who end up being models of discipleship. We'll talk about this more as the year goes along. For now, suffice it to say that because Peter's mother-in-law has been served by Jesus, she, in turn, reaches out and serves others. That's what disciples do. And in her own small way, she creates a place for others to gather and worship.

You can probably see where this story is heading. Capernaum is a small town. The news spreads like wildfire. By sundown, there's a veritable parade of people approaching the house. Jesus goes out to them. He works late into the night healing many who are sick and possessed by demons.

As the late night turns into an early morning, we get a rare glimpse into Jesus' humanity. He needs a break. No, he doesn't grab a five-hour energy drink. While it's still dark outside, he gets up and goes to a deserted place. And he prays. Not only does

Jesus keep the Sabbath. Not only does he gather with his disciples in a small group. He takes the time to pray alone. His life is marked by the regular rhythm of work and rest and prayer.

His retreat is short-lived, however. The people keep coming. The clamoring gets louder. Peter and company soon hunt Jesus down. They don't know what else to do. Isn't it ironic? Peter's mother-in-law somehow manages to serve *them* after her fever subsides, but Peter and the guys—when push comes to shove—don't know what to do.

Jesus' response is noteworthy. He doesn't give the crowds what they want, which would be more miracles. Instead, he resolves to go on to another village, so he can keep preaching. Jesus wants his message—and not his miracles—to be the main thing. And his message, which we heard earlier in Mark, is this: “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” As far as Jesus is concerned, the announcement that God has come near makes all the difference in the world.

In 2012 we at Zumbro are focusing on God coming near to us, and specifically, God coming near to us in worship. Throughout the year, we'll be exploring one primary question: how can God use us to *Create a Place for All to Worship*? I think this story from Mark gives us some clues about what we need to be doing. *One of those clues is the regular rhythm of work and rest and prayer.* The fact of the matter is, Jesus kept the Sabbath. It was part of his weekly rhythm. If the Sabbath was important and life-giving for Jesus, busy as he was, what makes us think that it isn't important and life-giving for us? We're going to be talking about Sabbath keeping during Lent. Considering the craziness of our schedules and the information overload of our culture, this might be one of the more crucial issues of our time.

Another clue for 2012 is to lift up the importance and value of worship. Sometimes worship involves personal devotions early in the morning in a quiet place. Sometimes it involves gathering with a small group and having lunch and conversation together. And sometimes it involves the assembly of the whole congregation.

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. It means “to be called out of the world.” Keep in mind, we're not “called out” simply to be consumers. Worship isn't only about *getting* what we want from God, it's about what we *give* to God: our thanks and praise and adoration. It's about a relationship. At the heart of it is Jesus' first and great

commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.” When we connect with this God of ours in worship, our lives are fundamentally changed.

Still another clue for 2012 is to pay attention to all the people around us still clamoring for healing, and wholeness, and peace. If you don’t think people are still clamoring today, just watch the Super Bowl ads. Hope and happiness and meaning are promised in one ad after another. Much like in Jesus’ day, people aren’t necessarily looking for these things in a religious setting. In fact, studies show that over the last 10-20 years, church attendance has dropped dramatically. And it’s dropped in every major church in the country except for Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. What that trend says to me is that people aren’t as likely to come to us; we’re going to need to go to them. We’re going to want to listen to their concerns, to pray for their well-being, and to invite them into further conversation. And, when it’s appropriate, we may be able to invite them to join us for worship.

As we work on *creating a place for all to worship*, we’ll continue with some of our efforts from last year. We’ll work to provide a welcome for any and all who comes our way: visitor parking places, friendly greeters, helpful ushers, user-friendly bulletins. We’ll let the parents of young children know they’re welcome. We’ll practice the two-minute connection to get acquainted with those we don’t yet know. We’ll provide fresh coffee and tasty doughnuts, and if we really want to be helpful, we might even take somebody back to the lounge with us, because if you’re a newcomer, that room can be one of the scariest places in the whole church.

This year we intend to go deeper. We’ll be engaging in lots of conversations about *how* we worship. We’ll explore questions like: *How can we better understand what we’re trying to do in worship and so deepen our experience of it?* We’ll ask: *Who’s attending worship at Zumbro, and who’s not, and why? And what, if anything, do we want to do about it?* We’ll ask: *Should we add another worship service? If so, when?* We’ll ask: *Should we think about offering more than one worship style? If so, what?* We’ll ask: *What do we do about reading the Bible in worship, because for those who don’t know the biblical story, the current readings are often more confusing than helpful?*

And if we have the time, we might even ask: *How does our sanctuary help our worship life and when does it sometimes get in the way?*

These and other questions will occupy our attention. Let me remind you, we don't know where these conversations will take us. There is no master plan. But we sincerely hope that our worship experience will be enriched in the process and that God will work in us and through us to create a place for all to worship.

How important are these efforts? Maybe more than we know. Not long ago, Rollie Martenson of Luther Seminary told a compelling story about a man he met on an airplane. It turns out the man was a Presbyterian, or at least he used to be. He and his family were busy with work, and church, and sports, and community service, and a variety of activities. Many weeks, there simply wasn't enough time to go around. One day they called a family meeting. Something had to give. So, they decided together to give up on church. In their thinking, what they got out of church simply wasn't enough to justify being a part of a worshipping community.

Sad to say, this story is not uncommon. It happens all the time. The challenge for us, I think, is to do some reflecting about why worship is important to us. The point is not to be able to convince or argue or shame people into going to church. No, it's to be able to better understand what's happening in our culture and to more deeply appreciate the importance of our focus for the year.

What's at stake here? Nothing less than the good news of God's coming to us in Jesus. Remember, Jesus went on to another village so he could share the good news with others. That news is as important today as it was back then. Every community is a patchwork quilt of hope and hurt, of fears and needs and aspirations. Whether people know it or not, they need a place to belong. Whether they know it or not, they long to feel connected to God. They need a power that can transform their lives and make them new again.

And let's be honest, we need those things too. So we come to worship week after week, longing to be connected to a God who loves us, needing a community that cares for us and gives us a place to belong. As we are loved and cared for, hopefully we are able to do what Peter's mother-in-law did, our small part to create a place for others to gather and worship. Amen.