

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Last Sunday, after church and the adult Bible study were over, I did something I do on a regular basis. I drove over to Hale Makua in Wailuku. At Hale Makua there is a man named John. There are several things to know about John. First, John spends most of his time lying on his back in his bed. He would like to do other things - like coming to church, but he needs assistance to even get out of bed into his wheel chair. Second, he is not a member of or even associated with KLC but he is a believer. Third, he knows the words of institution by heart and loves to say them loudly and proudly. Fourth, we occasionally but not often talk as we did last Sunday. He asked me about my homily and the texts. I commented on our reading from Jonah. And then he asked me point blank if I believed the Jonah and the whale story was true. I replied honestly, I do not know - sometimes maybe yes and then - sometimes maybe not so much. Finally, I said - but does it really matter? It is a story about God and that I think the two most important things is to **believe** in God and God's power, and to **trust** God and God's promises.

On Mondays, I normally participate in the Monday Faith Journey groups' Zoom get together. This group has been meeting for many, many years and most recently is using the writings of Richard Rohr to start our discussion. And yes, I do sometimes quote Richard Rohr, who is a Catholic Priest. This past Monday was an interesting follow up to my Sunday conversation with John. In our reading, Richard Rohr said: "If I have grown at all in my decades as a priest, it's in part through this role of being a teacher and preacher. I have had to stand before crowds for years and describe what I thought I believed, and then I often had to ask myself later, "Do I really believe that myself?""

On the one hand, I want to say that I fully understand and agree with this statement for myself excluding any idea of decades. Yet, I have been a lay leader and teacher for decades as well. I think the most profound thought I can offer you is that Christianity, in fact any religion, really only has a couple primary beliefs. **Then** - religious institutions and people get involved and muddy the waters of faith with a vast amount of really meaningless minutia. It is all this minutia that becomes the basis for all our religious division, **and** probably our political divisions as well. In the last few years, in fact, the ELCA and many other mainline denominations have been trying to focus on our **common** beliefs rather than the minutia that separates us. This is an effort to bring us together, to find common ground.

Listen again to the last words in our reading from Deuteronomy: "**But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die.**" Now, I do not know about you, about other preachers, or about other prophets but that reading is terrifying to me. I constantly ask myself if all that I say and teach is truly God's word. Yes, sometimes I **wonder** and sometimes I **fear**. Barbara Bruneau in her God Pause daily devotional on this Deuteronomy reading said: "I wonder, sometimes, if God ever grows weary of making allowances for our frailties." Amen - Sister Barbara - Amen.

Kathryn Schifferdecker began her commentary on this same Deuteronomy reading by asking the question: "How can you tell a true prophet from a false prophet?" She ultimately provides a list for our use.

- The true prophet does not seek to be a prophet. I think this is why the ELCA uses a discernment process we describe as a **call**.
- The true prophet seeks neither self-promotion nor riches. I think Nanette and I both struggled with this congregations' gifts to us at Christmas. The cards were great and the cash and checks was nice but also uncomfortable for us. That is not why we do what we do.
- The true prophet speaks God's word, not his or her own. Gosh, I hope and trust that this is so. And also why I rely so heavily on the words of Martin Luther and other great Lutheran theologians.
- The true prophet bears a "family resemblance" to what has come before. The Old Testament prophets pointed to erroneous actions and beliefs and then, they offered hope.
- The true prophet (and the false prophet) is known by his or her "fruit". What fruits are you, we producing?

And then we have our reading from the Gospel of Mark. Verses 22 and 27 each contain two "a" words. Verse 22 uses astounded and authority and verse 27 uses amazed and authority. In this story, the people are in another word – flabbergasted. Can you think of a time and leader in your life that left you in a similar way? Or may be in the opposite way? How did you respond? Do you think you responded appropriately? How would you respond to the same situation today? The same? Or differently?

What was it for these people about this Jesus of Nazareth? Did they think about and recognize true prophet traits in Jesus? One of the funny things about each of the gospels is that the first public act of Jesus tells us exactly who they see Jesus is in their story of Jesus. Jesus' ministry in Matthew begins with the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is the Teacher extraordinaire.

In Luke, Jesus' first act was a well-received hometown homily until the people figured out who the poor and oppressed Jesus wanted them to care about actually were. Jesus' first act in John was a sign of abundance, turning water into wine.

And here in Mark, Jesus' first act is an exorcism. Yes, Jesus is the Teacher, the Shepherd, the Savior, the King; but more important to Mark is Jesus the Exorcist. The boundary breaker. Since time immortal, societies have been about having boundaries. That is what caste and class systems do. That is what laws and rules do. We need them to protect us from them and to protect them from us. Boundaries simply create division.

Jesus is the ultimate boundary breaker and the revealer of God who also has no respect for boundaries. God bursts through. Ethnic, gender, political, racial, religious, sexual, social, and even death – what we might think is the final boundary. God is not interested in boundaries that separate us from God and from each other. God is interested in relationships that bring us together. God and us. Us and others. Can you see boundaries in your life? What are you going to do about them? Or maybe more important, what are you going to ask and let God do about them.

Is it possible to say that boundaries are also created to protect possessions like the man who was possessed? What possesses us? Affluence, anger, fear, substance abuse, workaholism, etc?

Hear then the good news:

Mark knows what the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah meant by good news.

Old Testament good news was that "God reigns and God is here."

When all looks like God is absent?

Our God **is** here.

Some of you may believe.

Some of you may agree with me.

Some of you may even disagree with me.

Some of you may wonder where God is in all that possesses you. Where is God when you are addicted, angry, depressed, or diseased and so on.

Your God is here, now.

Our God is a God of the broken.

Our church is a fellowship for and servant of the needy.

Martin Luther said: "What is it to serve God and to do His will? Nothing else than to **show mercy to our neighbor**. For it is our own neighbor who needs our service; God in heaven needs it not."

Grace and peace to you my friends. God is here.

Amen