

The Church Called

E3-12, Jan. 22, 2012
Mk. 1:14-20

Rev. Dr. C. E. Hagen
Memorial, Afton

Mark's Gospel sprints at breakneck speed from its opening verses.
It seems a mad rush to crucifixion.
The word "immediately" occurs 41 times in this gospel,
and only 10 times in the entire rest of the New Testament.
The sense is the unstoppable, rushing, impending kingdom of God.
The Lord is knocking at the gates this very moment!
No time to get ready, we can only brace for the full blast of God's glory.
We bemoan change,
but Kingdom come waits for no church or member.

John the baptizer was arrested.
To most this would seem a warning
to not challenge the powers that be.
To Jesus this is a sign to rejoice,
for those powers that be are about to end.
"The time is fulfilled."
Our English translation of these first verses do not quite capture their original meaning.
The "time" intended is something drastic and imminent about to happen.
Something has shifted in the heavens and nothing will be the same.
Something has been completed in the past that profoundly shapes the present.
"The Kingdom of God has come near."
Our English translation fails us.
In English it seems God's kingdom is somewhere close by,
perhaps down the block or over in Wisconsin.
The original words mean that the kingdom of God is now *upon us*,
has overcome us,
has taken over,
has replaced all other authorities and rulers and powers.
A coup has occurred in creation.
The Kingdom of God is now in command.
"Repent and believe in the good news."
The good news is not some mysterious doctrine,
but the very fact that God now is in charge,
and Jesus has taken over.

The first act Jesus does is start the church.
The first "miracle" or "sign" he does is create the church.
Memorial Lutheran Church has its beginnings,
not with some Swedes in a farmhouse 130 years ago,
but with Jesus in Galilee in these first verses of Mark.
The first act Jesus does is organize some followers to start the Church.
The first to be nominated to Jesus' first "church council"
are Simon and his brother Andrew.
Simon will later be nicknamed "Peter,"
the one who infamously denied know anything about Jesus
when the going got tough.
Jesus will eventually call into this first band of disciples
a lying, cheating tax collector,
a couple of hotheads who want things done their way,
a terrorist, cowards, misfits,
and Judas who will betray him to killers.
Jesus knew what he was doing.

Jesus knew Peter would deny even knowing him.
 Jesus knew Judas would betray him.
 Jesus knew what he was doing.
 Jesus knows what he is doing with Memorial Lutheran Church.
 Things are still kind of rough here,
 communication is not as thorough as we want,
 decisions are made that upset some,
 personalities and preferences collide.
 But Jesus knows what he is doing.
 It may just very well be that Jesus intentionally made this church
 to be a little unsettling,
 a little annoying,
 a little less than slick and shiny.
 Perhaps Jesus knows what he is doing
 making Memorial a little like the world around us,
 so as to make Memorial a little more approachable to the world around us,
 a little more human,
 a little more real.

We need to be careful about assuming we know what will attract people to our church.
 We need to think twice about what those seeking Jesus need in a church.

A recent article written by a young adult
 describes well what I hear often from the generation younger than most of us.
 [by Rachel Held Evans]¹

*People sometimes assume that because I'm a progressive 30-year-old
 who enjoys Mumford and Sons and has no children,
 I must want a super-hip church—you know,
 the kind that's called "Thrive" or "Be"
 and which boasts "an awesome worship experience,"
 a fair-trade coffee bar, its own iPhone app,
 and a pastor who looks like a Jonas Brother.*

*While none of these features are inherently wrong,
 (and can of course be used by good people to do good things),
 these days I find myself longing for a church with a cool factor of about 0.
 That's right.*

*I want a church that includes fussy kids, old liturgy, bad sound, weird congregants,
 and...brace yourself...painfully amateur "special music" now and then.*

Why?

*Well, for one thing,
 when the gospel story is accompanied by a fog machine and light show,
 I always get this creeped-out feeling like someone's trying to sell me something. It's as though
 we're all compensating for the fact
 that Christianity's not good enough to stand on its own so we're adding snacks.
 But more importantly, I want to be part of an un-cool church
 because I want to be part of a community that shares the reputation of Jesus,
 and like it or not, Jesus' favorite people in the world were not cool.
 They were mostly sinners, misfits, outcasts, weirdos, poor people, sick people,
 and crazy people.
 Cool congregations can get so wrapped up in the "performance" of church
 that they forget to actually **be** the church,
 a phenomenon painfully illustrated by the story of the child with cerebral palsy
 who was escorted from the Easter service at Elevation Church
 for being a "distraction."*

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Blessed Are the Uncool*, <http://rachelheldevans.com/blessed-are-the-uncool>, accessed January 16, 2012

Really?

It seems to me that this congregation was distracted long before this little boy showed up! In their self-proclaimed quest for "an explosive, phenomenal movement of God—something you have to see to believe,"

they missed Jesus when he was right under their nose.

Was the paralytic man lowered from the rooftop in the middle of a sermon a distraction?

Was the Canaanite woman

who harassed Jesus and his disciples about healing her daughter a distraction?

Were the blind men from Jericho who annoyed the crowd with their relentless cries a distraction?

Jesus didn't think so.

In fact, he seemed to think that they were the point.

Jesus taught us that when we throw a banquet or a party,

our invitation list should include

"the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

So why do our church marketing teams

target the young, the hip, the healthy, and the resourced?...

Church can be a lot like the Y...or a Starbucks bathroom.

We have one place for the un-cool people (our ministries)

and another place for the cool people (our church services).

When we actually bump into one another,

things can get awkward, so we try to avoid it...

Some of us wear our brokenness on the inside, others on the outside.

But we're all broken.

We're all un-cool. We're all in need of a Savior.

So let's cut the crap, pull the plug, and have us some distracting church services...

the kind where Jesus would fit right in.

Do you ever get the feeling that church is just one big show?

Have you found a congregation in which Jesus and his friends would be welcome.

Perhaps Jesus knew what he was doing

when he called the likes of Simon Peter, Matthew, James and John, Judas.

Perhaps Jesus knew what he was doing when he started the Church

which has become the likes of Memorial Lutheran.

With the church, perhaps Jesus was giving the world

not so much glamor and glory, comfort and coddling,

but perhaps Jesus was giving the world

a way to be a community that cares,

a way to learn and practice forgiveness, mercy, new chances.

Perhaps Jesus was giving the world

a gift that comes *only* through people who are not perfect,

only through church that is not perfect,

only through worship that is noisy and rough,

because it is *only* there that we learn patience with one another,

forbearing one another,

forgiving one another.

Some things necessary for life

come *only* through that which is *not* perfectly pressed, presented and performed.

I don't know about you,

but I think there is more drama and plot, adventure and intrigue

in what Jesus does with imperfect, diverse people

than with pre-packaged piety.

I don't know about you,

but I happen to think churches like Memorial are the *best* churches

for experiencing the real scoop about Jesus.

Amen.