

The Outward-Focused Church Keeping Jesus to Ourselves

Matthew 20:20-34

This past week was a very special one for Joanna and me. Our daughter, Amanda, her husband, Bobby, and our newest grandchild, Bobby returned for a visit from Honduras as they seek to raise additional support for the next two years of mission work. They are spending the next two weeks on vacation with Bobby's family and then we will have a lot more baby time before they go back to Honduras.

I don't know if you realize it or not, but my daughter Amanda and I are movie stars. Yes, it's true we starred in a movie with Susan Sarandon. The movie was called Earthly Possesions. Actually our part lasted about 10 seconds. The movie was filmed in Ocean Grove and they were using Neptune High School band students to be part of a parade scene. Our daughter Karen was in the band and when we went to pick her up and watch what was going on, Amanda and I got to be part of the action. It was some kind of police chase and we had to demonstrate a reaction to this car racing through the crowd. Well, that was our 10 seconds of fame and the end of our acting career.

Well, I want you to run another movie in your mind. It is the scene from Matthew 20. Two men who are blind are sitting along the road and you picture this crowd walking with Jesus...You hear the sound, feel the pushing and yelling, all the people surrounding Jesus. And then these two men start crying out: Lord, have mercy on us....they want to reach out to Jesus, this wonderful healer. And notice the crowds' reaction. The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet. But they shout all the louder and Jesus who is moved with compassion and heals these men.

OK, let's do a rewind. Let's look at that scene again. Watch the crowd, watch it several times. What do you see? What do you notice about their reactions? What is happening? Well, of course, we can only speculate, but I wonder if the people didn't want these two blind men to interfere with their time with Jesus. Didn't want them to get into their space. It was almost as if they felt Jesus belonged to them. I mean, such an attitude is not too much a stretch of the imagination. Just consider the previous passage. You have the mother of James and John feeling the same way. She demands that her sons have a special

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place in the kingdom. Jesus, it only seems right. These guys are entitled to that. They have dedicated their lives to serving you.

But it's interesting that Jesus never dealt with people in that way. He wasn't in the business of granting special privileges. He was ever reaching out to the least, the lost, the hurting people of the world.

And so this is the introduction to this sermon series on The Outward-Focused Church. We are going to be concentrating on what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ and asking ourselves where is our focus, what does in need to be.

So let's look at this scene again and fast forward it to our own day. Just like Amanda and I got to be part of the crowd in a movie, let's picture ourselves in this scene. We are in the crowd, we are walking with Jesus. And what a wonderful feeling it is. To be this close to Jesus. And you know what begins to happen...what began as a special blessing, now becomes an opportunity to become possessive of this experience. Jesus makes us feel good about ourselves, and we want to keep Jesus for ourselves. We close our ears to the cries of people about us, because we want Jesus for ourselves.

You know, that can happen within the church of Jesus Christ. The people in the church become that crowd. People who have experienced God's love, forgiveness, and grace, but don't let anybody else get in the way. We are in the parade. We got Jesus and we can become content to leave it that way.

But if we are truly the church of Jesus Christ, we learn from the example of Jesus himself. He doesn't let the crowd keep him from ministering to someone in need.

And so we are called to listen...listen, there are people outside the church who are crying out. Many different people, with many different needs. People who are hurting, broken, troubled.

I don't know...it is too harsh to say that sometimes we become like that crowd who sternly rebuke those crying for help?

We come to church each weekend. We have a wonderful facility to worship, we have many things to build up our faith. We can get

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comfortable in the church. It's like we are walking with Jesus and we are content that keeping Jesus to ourselves. Do we really have to listen to the cries of the world?

Who are the ones crying out to Jesus? Who are the ones needing his healing touch?

Someone who doesn't have the material advantages we may have, who struggles everyday for basic survival.

Someone whose world has collapsed around them, because of a loss of employment, or a broken relationship, or the loss of a loved one.

Someone dealing with a drug or alcohol addiction, someone caught up in a personal crisis. Someone who doesn't know where to turn for help.

Someone with a spiritual need, but feels lost and confused.

Here we are in the church. In the crowd with Jesus. We want to hold on. Yet God is calling us to open the door for others to see Jesus, others to know his healing, loving touch.

Maybe we simply call it Outreach....asking ourselves: How do we get beyond the mentality of keeping Jesus for ourselves. How do we reach into our communities and offer God's love.

Most churches have an outreach or missions committee. Our church certainly does. And we do great things...we provide food for the local food pantry, provide space for homeless families through Family Promise, serve breakfast to those in need in Camden, do mission projects like the Philadelphia project or Habitat for Humanity, and many other outreaches as well...

Today we have celebrated and acknowledged the dedication and commitment of two of our own, Dr. Fred and Mariana Pequero who have faithfully through the years led and carried out the work of mission in the name of Jesus Christ. We are going to miss their presence.

Our outreach committee and our missions committee are very faithful in providing support for many ministries. Carrying out the mission of Christ. But for the church to be faithful to its mission, we have to

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realize that outreach has to be more than a committee, more than a few individuals; it is the task and mission of all of us.

Our United Methodist Discipline describes it like this: “The local church shall be organized so that it can pursue its primary task and mission in the context of its own community – reaching out and receiving with joy all who will respond.” In other words, this is why we exist. We are here to be in mission.

In the book – Growing Spiritual Redwoods the author highlights the difference between declining churches and thriving churches. These are some of the characteristics that we need to carefully examine as we look at our mission as a church:

Declining

Committed to the church
Managing committees
Holding offices
Making decisions
Serving at the church
Surveying internal needs

Loyal to one another

Thriving

Committed to Christ
Deploying mission
Doing Hands-on ministries
Making disciples
Serving in the world
Discovering the needs of the community
Drawn to the unchurched

And this last one is especially relevant to us as we celebrate our Anniversary:

Perpetuating a heritage

Visioning a future

Certainly we want to celebrate our history, but our focus must be on where is God leading us in the future.

You see this common denominator in this list under thriving churches: A sense of openness, a willingness to look beyond themselves, a commitment to work together for the mission of Christ.

This is our challenge and reminder...that we be an outward-focused church. And so we continue to ask ourselves: how are we reaching out as a church? In what ways have we been open to meeting the needs of others. How can I be involved in the church’s mission in my

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community? These are serious questions for the disciple of Jesus Christ.

I think one of the most powerful stories on reminding us of our mission is the story of the life-saving station:

“On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a little life-saving station. The building was primitive, and there was just one boat, but the members of the life-saving station were committed and kept a constant watch over the sea. When a ship went down, they unselfishly went out day or night to save the lost. Because so many lives were saved by that station, it became famous. Consequently, many people wanted to be associated with the station to give their time, talent, and money to support its important work. New boats were bought, new crews were recruited, a formal training session was offered. As the membership in the life-saving station grew, some of the members became unhappy that the building was so primitive and that the equipment was so outdated. They wanted a better place to welcome the survivors pulled from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged and newly decorated building.

Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They met regularly and when they did, it was apparent how they loved one another. They greeted each other, hugged each other, and shared with one another the events that had been going on in their lives. But fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions; so they hired lifeboat crews to do this for them. About this time, a large ship was wrecked off of the coast, and the hired crews brought into the life-saving station boatloads of cold, wet, dirty, sick, and half-drowned people. They were people from different backgrounds and languages. The beautiful meeting place became a place of chaos. The plush carpets got dirty. Some of the exquisite furniture got scratched. So the property committee immediately had a shower built outside the house where the victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was rift in the membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities, for they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal fellowship of the members. Other members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they

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were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all those various kinds of people who would be shipwrecked, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. And do you know what? That is what they did.

As the years passed, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a place to meet regularly for fellowship, for committee meetings, and for special training sessions about their mission, but few went out to the drowning people. The drowning people were no longer welcomed in that new life-saving station. So another life-saving station was founded further down the coast. History continued to repeat itself. And if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of adequate meeting places with ample parking and plush carpeting. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.” Thomas Wedel, *Ecumenical Review*, October, 1953, paraphrased in Heaven Bound Living, Knofel Stanton

Let’s run the tape again. Now picture that crowd again...walking with Jesus...Look closely and what do you see...you and me walking with Jesus and now listen to the cries of people needing the touch of Jesus, needing to know of Jesus’ love. What will we say, what will we do. If we are truly the church God calls us to be, we will pay attention to those cries, we will find those folks, and make sure they find Jesus.

We do it by our example. Because the example of how we live out our faith speaks louder than our words about outreach and mission. You remember the words of St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words. “

Being an outward-focused church is committing ourselves to mission. Looking beyond the walls of the church and touching lives with God’s love and grace.

I pray that God will help us to let go of any sense of keeping Jesus to ourselves so that we may open the way for others to find the Jesus we love.