

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus' ministry was a preaching ministry. Remember? Jesus began His ministry, "*proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'*" (Mark 1:14-15). Last week, we heard how Jesus amazed the people with His teaching ... teaching "*them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes*" (Mark 1:22). And today, we heard Jesus say to His disciples: "*Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.*"

Nevertheless, as Jesus went from town to town, he was often confronted with human need. Jesus was often diverted from this primary task in order to perform works of mercy. Last week, you remember how He cast out an unclean spirit; and today, He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law with a touch; and later: He "*healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.*"

Even though doing these signs and wonders was not Jesus' primary purpose, still they served that purpose. They established who Jesus was, that He was not just an ordinary preacher. He taught and preached with authority. The people may not have been able to articulate it right away — like the unclean spirits did; like the demons who "*knew him*" would have had Jesus not silenced them — but the people knew that He was somebody special. And they flocked to Him.

These signs and wonders also help us to know Jesus, not just that "*God [was] with [him]*" (John 3:2), but that He is "*the Holy One of God*" (Mark 1:24) as the unclean spirits leaked out. He is "*the Son of God*" (Mark 15:39), as the centurion would confess Him to be. It's what we confess together as we join in the Nicene Creed: we believe in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God" — and not a son by faith as we are, who are "*led by the Spirit of God*" (Rom 8:14), but the only Son of God, of the same "substance with the Father" ... "God of God ... very God of very God." For Jesus did these signs and the evangelists wrote of them for this purpose: "*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:31).

Luther affirmed it, too: Jesus "displayed His glory and power in proof of His divinity." "Of this [truth] He gave proof with His teaching, His preaching, His signs and wonders, convincing anyone of His Godhead who was not blinded and hardened by the devil, By word and deed He proved that He was God by nature: He healed the sick and raised the dead" (*Luther's Works*, 22:114).

Surely, it's understandable that the people flocked to Him. They wanted to be healed; they wanted bread. It certainly got them excited. That's why Jesus would often retreat to a solitary place for prayer as He did in our text today. He knew the people might "*come and take him by force to make him king*" (John 6:15).

But Jesus' "*kingdom is not of this world,*" (John 18:36), and our God did not send His only Son among us simply for temporal healing. He sent Him for our eternal wellness, that we might obtain the imperishable prize. Surely, we are weak; we grow weary; we become exhausted; we stumble and fall. But it is not for this earthly life only that we hope in Christ. Our hope is in what is yet to be, what is promised by Christ, by His passion and death, by His resurrection — our heavenly treasure.

The kingdom that Jesus' preaching prepares us for is not of this world. It is for His everlasting kingdom, and for that Jesus had more to accomplish — He had to win our salvation. He had to offer up "*his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45). He had to "*suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again*" (Mark 8:31). He had to atone for our sins by His death and open up the gates of heaven by His resurrection from the dead.

And to us who wait for Him, who look to Jesus and believe in Him, this kingdom promises strength renewed — no more weariness; no more fainting; no more sorrow; no more weeping. We will (metaphorically) be flying high — a spiritual high; we will soar "*with wings like eagles.*" Now, we suffer with Him; then there will be a glory beyond compare (Rom. 8:17-18).

This is the message that we now proclaim, for following Christ's example, we have been sent out to preach — a "*necessity is laid upon [the church]. Woe to [the church and her pastors] if [they] do not preach the gospel,*" for this is the church's commission: to proclaim Jesus' authoritative words, to "*proclaim the gospel to the whole creation*" (Mark 16:15), to teach all things that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20), to preach Christ and Him crucified for our salvation, to preach "*repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" in Jesus' name (Luke 24:47), to preach that the kingdom of God has come in Christ Jesus. The Church preaches this with the same goal as Jesus did — that hearers might believe this good news and be saved.

And the Church's proclamation always begins with the cross, with a call to believe this Gospel. "*For the word of the cross is*" "*the power of God*" "*to us who are being saved*" (1 Cor. 1:18). "*[W]e preach Christ crucified,*" says St. Paul, "*a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (1 Cor. 1:23-24). And, "*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Rom. 10:9).

And this is true even if you're talking about the Sacraments, for what do we proclaim of baptism, except that we are "*baptized into his death,*" that by baptism "*our old self [has been] crucified with him*" (Rom. 6:3, 6)? The Lord's Supper, too, is a proclamation of Christ crucified, for you know that "*as often as you eat*

Following Jesus' Example, the Church Preaches Cross and Shows Mercy
Page 3 Epiphany 5b — Mark 1:29-39 Pastor Douglas Punke
this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

This message is what St. Paul calls the things of first importance: "*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to*" many different people as eye witnesses of His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-5). His death and resurrection — this is the good news that Christians are called to believe.

On the other hand, even as Christ did more than simply preach, but did works of mercy, so the Church has a duty of mercy. I've reminded you before of the little pamphlet the President Harrison wrote as he led Zion to embark on neighborhood renewal here at Hanna and Creighton. "The Church Is a Mercy Place," he wrote. In it, he acknowledged the "both and" of the Gospel. Certainly, the church is not church without Christ, forgiveness, life, salvation, grace being preached. But neither is the church a grace place if she is not a mercy place, for much as Jesus did works of mercy affirming who He is, so the Church does works of mercy affirming whose she is. By doing works of mercy she opens ears and hearts to a hearing for the Gospel by which the Spirit moves hearts to salvation.

Pastor Harrison wrote, "In affirming the essential nature of the church's 'marks' (Gospel and sacrament) which tell us surely where the church is present, we dare not miss the fact that love and mercy toward the needy mark the church's corporate life. If not, it risks denial of the very Gospel and sacraments which constitute it."

We at Zion have been privileged to have a long history of pastors who have proclaimed the Gospel of Christ, forgiveness full and free, who have served up His grace by word and sacrament — and also who have seen the need for acts of mercy. We are now winding down the work of the St. Peter/Zion Project, but that does not mean that Zion's mercy work is done. We must look for other ways to love and serve. To be sure, our mercy will not look miraculous like Jesus' did, but with a dedication not just to preaching but also to mercy, to a ministry like Jesus' own, body and soul, the Spirit will be at work.

Therefore, we pray, O God, whose almighty power is made know chiefly in showing mercy, grant us the fullness of Your grace, that we may love and serve our neighbors, that ears may be opened to hear the preaching of Christ, that people may come here and find here a God gracious and merciful, that they may be called to repentance and faith, and that they may be prepared with us for the treasures of heaven, a glory beyond compare.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.