

The Gospel Meets Us Where We Are

Last Sunday the members of our mission team to Honduras and I were worshipping with the congregation of the Holy Spirit, Espiritu Santo, in the town of Santa Rita. The plan for the day was that we would gather with the congregation, and Concepción, the congregation's lay leader, would be there to greet us, and Father Mejía, the priest for the area, would preside at the service—and I, as a visiting priest, would be asked to vest and stand at the altar with Fr. Mejía, and maybe, just *maybe*, I'd be asked to say a few words, which Oakley or Mike or Ted (the Spanish-speakers in our group) would translate for the assembly, since I don't have any Spanish of my own. At least, that was the *plan*. What *actually happened* was that when we got there, we were told that Fr. Mejía wasn't going to be able to be there after all, and that the best way to proceed would be for Concepción to lead the service, while I stepped up to the altar to consecrate the bread and wine for communion. After a bit of scrambling around we found a bilingual Prayer Book, with English on one page and Spanish on the other, and we decided that I'd pray a paragraph of the Eucharistic Prayer in English and Concepción would repeat it in Spanish, and we were good to go. So the service began—and for the next hour and a half or so I listened to scriptures read in a language I didn't understand, and clapped along to songs I didn't know, and alternated paragraphs of a prayer that means more to me than almost any other thing in my entire religious experience, and tried to lead the Lord's Prayer in Spanish ("Padre nuestro" was about all I got out), and generally celebrated the Eucharist with barely a clue of what was going on—except for one thing. As chaotic as it all may have seemed, as different as it was from every church service I've ever done before, there was one thing that was perfectly clear to me the whole time: Jesus was there, and the Holy Spirit was moving among us, and God was well and truly worshiped, and that service was *exactly what it needed to be*, so that all of us there could commune together in the Good News of God in Christ.

That service was for me a great experience of the basic Christian truth that the Gospel meets us where we are—the Gospel speaks to us with the Good News we most need to hear—for each of us, in our own circumstances and our own situations, in our own languages, in our own needs and our own joys, the Gospel comes to us precisely in the way we need it most. And the *minister* of the Gospel, the one who *speaks* Good News, speaks best when she or he meets others where they are, and can be for others what others most need them to be.

I think that is precisely what we see Jesus doing in the Gospel reading today. In this short passage Mark gives us a kind of "day in the life" of Jesus; Mark shows Jesus meeting all kinds of people where they are, and being for them just what they most need him to be. The story begins with Jesus and his disciples on their way back from the synagogue, where Jesus has been the preacher and teacher in the official, religiously recognized roles. At Simon's house, Jesus is the close friend, the table companion, who shows forth God's love in his very homey way of healing Simon's mother-in-law. Later that night, a whole crowd gathers around the house, and Jesus becomes the public figure and famous healer who can embrace a multitude and turn no one aside. The next morning Jesus goes out to pray by himself, and there he models the kind of quiet, solitary prayer that all of us need if we are to be really grounded and rooted in God. And when the disciples want Jesus to go back to town and be their resident celebrity, Jesus goes on to the neighboring towns, to show them that God's love is not just for one select group of people, but is meant for everyone. At each turn of the story Jesus does exactly what is needed for exactly those people, with exactly those needs, in exactly that time and exactly that place. Jesus meets people

where they are, and Jesus is for people what they most need him to be, so that he can show forth God's love in the way that loves the most.

And Jesus meets us today in the same way. The Good News about Jesus comes to us today as we most need to hear it, in the style and the form and the substance that will be the *best* news for us. Sometimes the Gospel comes to us as a comfort, as a healing word that breaks through the hard shell of our pain and opens up our eyes to see there is something more than the fear and hurt that too often bid to control us. Sometimes the Gospel comes to us as a good swift kick in the pants, a call to action that moves us out of our comfort zones and empowers us to engage in working for peace and justice, right relationships for mutual well-being, in times and places and circumstances we had not imagined. Sometimes the Gospel come to us as a still, small voice, a moment of quiet in the midst of all our daily cacophony, that calls us to step back from all the busy-ness and be aware that God is here and the Spirit is moving and this is holy ground. The Good News about Jesus comes to us in many ways, in many forms, through many words—and it always comes to us in the way we most need to hear it, the way to move us most toward God.

And if Jesus meets us that way, then I think Jesus calls us to meet others that way too. If the Good News comes to us, it doesn't just stay with us, but it moves on through us for others. The Good News for us today is that God gives *us* grace, so that we can be so firmly grounded and rooted in the Gospel, that we can meet people where they are, we can show people the love they most need to be shown, we can be for others what they most need us to be. Sometimes that means celebrating the Eucharist with barely a clue of what's going on, except that Jesus is there. Sometimes that means getting out of the church, and going out to do hands-on ministry in places of poverty and danger and injustice. Sometimes that means sitting very quietly, hurting along with someone who is hurting, not trying to *fix* their sorrow but just to feel their sorrow with them, just to let them know they're not alone. Sometimes that means setting aside our own agendas, and listening for God's Wisdom to speak to us through the opinions and perspectives of someone we've never ever agreed with in our whole lives. Sometimes that means giving up your sense of being here with your close circle of friends in church, and going out of your way to make a stranger feel welcome, going out of your way to help someone who doesn't know our Prayer Book find their way around the service, going out of your way to exchange the Peace with a visitor first, before you go and shake hands with all your familiar friends. Sometimes that means doing up the service with all the ceremony and all the music we can muster, to show forth the beauty of God's creativity and love. And sometimes being so firmly rooted and grounded in the Gospel that we can meet others where they are means being willing to give up a lot of the things we think of as being church, and strip down to the essentials of living into the world the love Christ lives for us.

The challenge of the Gospel to us today is to learn to be so firmly rooted in our own identity in Christ, that we are not afraid be for others what they most need us to be. And the promise of the Gospel to us today is that, when we strive to do that, Christ himself meets us, and Christ himself empowers us to show forth his grace, Christ himself empowers us to be all things to all people, so that we may by all means save some, because in Christ all things are one in God's love. And that is Good News we can receive today, and Good News we can share everyday; Good News in Honduras, and Good News here in Staunton, too. Amen.