

Not Heard?

Isaiah 40: 21-31; 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

A church permits a local community organization to use one of its rooms for meetings. The organization is committed to good causes: after-school programs for kids, or cleaning the litter up from public spaces, or literacy. It's something like that, and that's the very reason the church offers space for the group to meet. The group's goals seem consistent with the broad mission of the church, to make the world better for everyone.

That monthly meeting turns off the lights and locks the doors and you'd hardly know they were there. Toward year's end the go-between from the meeting to the church stops to see the pastor. He tells the pastor that the meeting is so grateful for the use of the room, that they've taken up a collection. They have x amount of dollars and they are going to give a check in that amount to another community effort housed by the church, a program to buy back-to-school clothes for children who need help with that.

The pastor manages to sound grateful, but of course the school-clothes-buying program hasn't been providing the lights or the heat or the space. They just are fellow beneficiaries of the church's effort to be like Christ and address the needs of the world. It's the church to which the grateful meeting really is grateful, but the people in that meeting don't feel they can give a gift directly to the church, because that would constitute supporting the church itself, and at least some of the people who are part of the meeting aren't believers.

Of course it's a good thing that the outsiders who meet at the church understand that the essence of the church is faith in God, even if their understanding of that shows up as an unwillingness to support that faith. It's a good thing that their gratitude for the church's hospitality makes them do something nice for someone else. It's even an okay thing from the perspective of the church, because Jesus Christ, whose church it is, teaches that the right way to be generous is to expect nothing in return. Finally, it is not surprising that a do-gooder secular organization would hesitate at materially supporting a faith enterprise, because if these people recognized their conscience and their altruistic instincts as gifts from God they wouldn't have to work that out through a group meeting once a month in a little room in the church building. If they knew that their desire to serve their neighbors and make the world better were God's calling for them they could show up every week in the biggest room in the church building and work out their intentions as part of a religion.

The thing about churches like this one is that we have so long emphasized the need to help people with the practical realities of life that we sometimes become less different from these well-intentioned outsiders than they think we are. We may find ourselves enthusiastic to buy the bricks-and-mortar to rebuild after a natural disaster and glad to send slates and pencils and erasers for the village schools, and pay the salary of a medical

missionary to apply ointments and offer pills, yet hesitate at providing a living to the kind of missionary who goes into a non Christian culture to share the story of Jesus Christ. We know it will do people good to have an extra sack of rice or a supply of safe water, but we don't entirely trust how the gospel will be presented, or how it will change them.

I understand that. There are teachers about God and the gospel that I think have the story more wrong than right. There are evangelists and preachers who emphasize bits of the Bible that I downplay, and downplay parts of the scriptures I emphasize. There are Christians so enthusiastic about their own understanding that their efforts to tell the story of Jesus seem more like imposing their point of view on another person than freeing another to consider the claims of the faith. Many of us have been approached by strangers who felt they understood God better than we do and thought their approach to faith was more sound than our own, and we resented that, and we are applying the Golden Rule not to belabor some poor stranger with a self-righteous, presumptuous salesperson for that brand of religion.

One way we avoid that is to build schools and hospitals and dig wells. One way we avoid that is to start co-ops and build shelters and fix infrastructure. All that time the most faithful of us tell ourselves, "when they ask why I am doing all this, then I'll tell them that it's because I believe that's how God wants people to live together."

That's good when that happens. There is no better occasion for speaking of faith than when the other party broaches the topic. Today's scriptures, however, challenge a customary priority we place on practical help, and a routine reticence to speak of God. Those who speak for God in the Bible are confident that their message is good, and they cannot conceive of a more compassionate service to others than to tell people what God is like.

The prophet Isaiah believes that hearing about God is encouraging, that it expands horizons, that it lifts spirits. The scripture we have this morning twice asks "Have you not heard?" There is something great to be known about reality. There is a loving and wonderful God at the heart of all of it, and that God is on your side.

Prophets are always messengers, they're always about saying what God needs said. For some reason we equate being prophetic with telling people off, with the bearded guy in his bathrobe on the sidewalk proclaiming that the world will end, or the steely-nerved person of virtue at a podium denouncing the greed and hypocrisy of the privileged. That's what God has to say sometimes, and it's good when God says it-- it's surgical, it's pain inflicted to permit healing to take place. But prophets aren't all about lacing into people. Prophets are also about binding up people's wounds, helping the hurting, encouraging the fainthearted. Isaiah in today's scriptures, and a fair amount in his entire message, alternates criticism with consolation.

Offering consolation, giving encouragement, insisting on there being hope, can be achieved, in part, by education, by medicine, by infrastructure. Just seeing that people

make an effort to be helpful is heartening, no matter what kind of help it is.

If anyone should understand, however, that having physical needs met is inadequate for people to know peace and to trust the reality of their lives, it's us. We have a roof over our heads and food in the larder and if we are among the fortunate, health insurance, but we can be fretful, anxious, discontented, suspicious, superstitious and stupid. We can feel that life is terrible, that it's out of control, that there's nothing in which to believe and nobody to trust, and no prospect of improvement. All of us sometimes are tempted to feel that way.

Our full stomachs and our medicated ailments and our funded retirement accounts don't address the despair which can be part of life. What we need to deal with that is faith, with hope in something larger than ourselves. We need the resources of sound belief, to offset the dark possibilities that life presents us. We need spiritual resources to rise above the resentments and cynicism inspired by everything that's wrong with the world. If we have faith, if we have just a little faith-- and Jesus more than once emphasizes just a little faith is a lot of something to have--then we are so much better off that it's amazing we undervalue imparting faith, that we have second thoughts, sometimes, about the project of inviting nonbelievers to open themselves to belief.

"Have you not heard?" asks Isaiah. The apostle Paul speaks of his sharing the gospel as an obligation. It dominates him. It teaches him to be resourceful, finding ways to have enough in common with anyone to whom he wishes to speak to find the shared experience which facilitates give-and-take. Paul has great news for people and it's so important that they get it that Paul is willing to take whatever approach works best to get the message across.

The primacy of proclamation, the emphasis on sharing the good news, is part of the gospel lesson. Jesus has arrived on the scene as a healer, someone with the power to address the most pressing of human needs. He is such a success at it that the whole community comes for his services. He is not grudging in dispensing it-- he regards it as the work of God. After prayer, however, he realizes he can't remain in the role of healer, or stay put in one place. He tells the disciples who have searched for him that he has to go to the other towns to spread the word, that's why he has begun his work.

The challenge to every church is to find a way to own the urgency and the clarity which Jesus and Paul possessed, to make sure that people hear good news about God. Paul's flexibility in seeking common ground is perhaps our best clue, alongside Jesus' opening the way for his word with his practical help and openness to addressing the problems of strangers. The world has its assumptions about what Christianity means, many of them prejudices and caricatures of our faith. Those complicate our ability to communicate, but they make it all the more important. The world always is in need of good news, and hope, and a conviction of the purpose and the point of living. God has shared that with us in order to keep the word, and the work, alive.

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