

Sermon by the Rev. Sam Massey
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This is such a great presbytery, and it is my home. I come from a great presbytery, the Presbytery of East Iowa, which has become another home to me. In fact, both presbyteries are so full of faithful, intelligent people I have a suggestion to make: that we consider some sort of collaborative relationship with each other, everything from cooperation to full merger. I have spoken so highly of all of you to East Iowa, don't be surprised if they come knocking one of these days. You have many assets to offer here, like your great committee structure. We also have assets, like a terrific stated clerk, a true servant leader, whom we could loan out to you. I think there are amazing possibilities for synergy.

Scripture lesson

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

I am honored and surprised to be invited to preach this morning here in the Presbytery of Des Moines. I remember many fine preachers here — one of the

best sermons I have ever heard was from a Des Moines presbytery pulpit, and it was not preached by me, I assure you — so I know one of your own numbers could easily fill the pulpit today. Perhaps together we can figure out why you issued this kind invitation to me.

Let us begin by admitting that we have something in common: We are a challenged people. In the last few years, as a denomination, we have lost 25 percent of our members. We are experiencing a great deal of free floating anger, and distrust.

We desperately need revitalization. If I were to be in a congregational context, I would be speaking of revitalization to congregations. If we were episcopal, I would share this message with the bishop and her cabinet. But we are Presbyterians, and this means that revitalization must happen here and now. The nice thing about presbyteries is that they are big enough to be diverse and small enough to be manageable. Revitalization is a challenge yet it is an achievable one, presbytery by presbytery.

What is the way forward, both here in your presbytery and over in East Iowa? This is what I would like us to explore together this morning. Let me begin by sharing with you my accountability for this sermon, the two witnesses that stare me down daily and remind me to whom I am answerable.

First is a bust of Jesus made of Philippine mahogany. He is the message, as in, “I know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified.” The second, another bust, is Hermes, the god of hermeneutics, of preaching. He reminds me that I am a messenger in the midst of a great company of messengers — all of you — and standing in a long line of messengers extending back millennia. If there is to be revitalization, the two witnesses inform us, it must come through the sharing of the good news, through the proclamation of the Risen Christ once crucified.

Indeed, that is the question of revitalization: How do our presbyteries live together in the way that — internally and externally — we embody, communicate, Jesus Christ? How are we together, relationally and tangibly, living out the good news of the gospel? Here again we encounter the two messengers. They insist that we articulate clearly and accountably our understanding of the gospel before we begin to share it in our presbytery’s body life.

So let us summarize it today as we find it in Mark 1. Mark tells us that God became human to reveal to us that God is a loving, saving God, and that in this God we can trust. As God in the flesh, Jesus taught us also what it means to be human: to love God and neighbor. Put another way, in Jesus' baptism he came under orders, he was ordained, to share a life-changing message of God's steadfast love. Let me observe that we, too, are all ordained; we are all under orders from our commander-in-chief, through our baptisms. As for us officers whom we call ordained, we officers are witnesses and examples to what God expects relationally out of all those baptized. People — the regular grunts in the pews and the new recruits — should be able to look at us, and see how they then should live. They should be able to see in our handling of relationships what it means to imitate Jesus.

To continue with the summary of the gospel, Jesus was Spirit-driven, as we are to be, and he shared the message that we, too, are given: It is called the Kingdom or Realm of God. This realm is here and now, and it is characterized by a disciplined commitment to social and environmental justice, individual acts of mercy, and faith that is open to God's future. Jesus recruited people to join with him to share in word and deed this good news, and he still does: We call this recruited people church and presbytery membership. God's vision through Jesus is global and involves the reclamation of all of creation: The church is the limited means to God's eternal ends. Church membership and growth are not the point. The hidden persistent growth of the Realm of God is the point.

With some clarity as to the good news, the question to which we return is, how does a presbytery embody it? I suggest that we get a handle on this by examining three of the "not" statements Jesus uses to describe his ministry. He does so in order to emphasize the positive statements that he makes immediately thereafter. The three statements are as follows: 1. I came not to be served but to serve; 2. I came not to bring peace, but a sword; 3. I came not to save the righteous, but sinners. Let's unpack these in light of what we know of the gospel.

First, let's examine Jesus' contention that he came not to be served but to serve. To serve is to count the interests of others before one's own. It is to empower, equip, and encourage others.

Let me share with you what happens when we Presbyterians get confused on this point and the calling of servanthood is lost. In the Presbytery of East Iowa, over the years, decision-making became increasingly centralized. I came in at the end of a long process, mind you. Apparently, it started innocently enough. We can agree that there are certain decisions that the gathered plenary should not try to make, like the type of copier that should be bought for the presbytery office. Ordered groups holding rightful authority should be able to trust some basic decisions to staff and small groups.

But over the years, a slow creep occurred. More and more decisions were made centrally on days the presbytery as a whole didn't meet, which was most of the time. Policies and procedures were adopted and implemented without any accountability to, or oversight by, presbytery. Some pastors and other capable individuals were overlooked when it came time to fill leadership positions within the presbytery. In the end, the centralized decision-making operation failed. As a presbytery we began a quest for a more democratic form of governance.

What we are left with, however, are two groups. Each group, in its own way, is slowing down our presbytery's quest to move forward.

First, there are those who had been a part of the centralized governing structure. They are now on the same playing field with everyone else. They have a sense of substantial loss and some are angry. Several have been loath to attend presbytery meetings or serve on presbytery committees. You could say some have taken their marbles and gone home.

Oddly, the second group obstructing progress perceives themselves to be on the winning side. Now that they are in charge, they see no reason to share power with those feeling dispossessed.

Paola Freire recognized this phenomenon in his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." When downtrodden persons finally gain power, they try to turn the tables on those who have been in power. The oppressed become the oppressors. Freire argued for a new paradigm of shared power, an arrangement where the once oppressed refuse to oppress but rather treat others as equals.

In East Iowa, we have not yet arrived at such a happy conclusion. We remain in a quiet, desperate, enervating power struggle.

Here is what is important to keep in mind. When power is viewed as a discrete, indivisible quantity, people fight over possession of it. They waste their energy in the process. When power is viewed as a quality that can be multiplied by sharing it, the most powerful person is the one who empowers others. If we measured our success by how well we served each other — that is, how well we encouraged, empowered and equipped each other, rather than by winning and losing — our congregations, presbyteries and entire structure would change overnight. By modeling and practicing servanthood, we could change our world. The call is a radical conversion in our understanding. To serve, as Quaker Robert Greenleaf taught, is to commit oneself to helping other people to grow as persons; to help others become healthier, wiser, freer, more independent, more likely to become servants themselves. The only legitimate measure of success for any one of us is whether or not other people are better servants for having been served by us. Imagine how our church and world would be transformed if we would embrace Christ's own servanthood, his own willingness to empty out his own life.

The second “not” statement made by Jesus was that he came not to bring peace, but a sword.

Let's face it, we clergy are afraid of conflict. One study suggested that this is true of most of us. So much so, in fact, that the accusation has been made that we are no more than shopkeepers, peddling our wares in the hopes of keeping our people happy. The suggestion made is that clergy who can't handle conflict should leave the ministry, and new clergy should be recruited first on their ability to engage positively in conflict. This all sounds extreme, but let us hear what Jesus is saying.

I don't think Jesus is so much advocating warfare. He is, after all, talking about familial relationships across the villages of Galilee and Judea. But he is confronting us with a deeper reality. In our fear of conflict, we have allowed too many issues to go unaddressed in our congregations, presbyteries, denomination and world. We have become enthralled to the tyranny of niceness, to the point that it now dictates to us that it is rude to point out that the strutting emperor has no clothes. We are not serving well when we serve a lie for the sake of preserving good feelings.

Let me share with you another example from East Iowa: We have churches located in places where there are no people in the surrounding neighborhoods. Simultaneously, we have rapidly growing neighborhoods where there are no Reformed bodies positioned to do mission and ministry. Our members are afraid to point out the obvious because the conversation would be painful and we might accidentally wound. So the church pours resources where Christ no longer has a calling for us, and we feign poverty when Christ calls to us from “where cross the crowded ways of life.” In our East Iowa presbytery we need a process by which we can say to churches: “Each one of us must prove — through our ministries and missions — why God needs us in this building and town. If we can do so, wonderful; if we cannot, we should sell our buildings and invest the proceeds in growing places in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is offered through the Reformed lens. This is because not all denominations or congregations are the same. Our world badly needs us.” Will this cause conflict? Yes. Is it a conflict in which we should engage kindly and faithfully, without anxiety? Yes.

We humans are so afraid of conflict, we live in a world designed to separate us from one another so it won’t happen. Think of how Amazon only advertises to us those books that it knows will agree with our perspective. Yet on this issue of embracing conflict, I believe Donald Trump did us a bit of a favor. Actually, he did us four favors. First, bad publicity is better than no publicity, and he gave us publicity. Second, Trump has made us dig dip and reflect on truly what it means to be Presbyterian. He has forced us to self-define. Third, he made us assert who we are in the public square, as a public witness, in order to defend ourselves from charges of sharing in Trump’s xenophobia. Fourth and most importantly, he said that we Presbyterians are religiously in the middle. Some of us took exception to this description, as if he meant we are lukewarm milquetoast. Perhaps he did mean this. But from my perspective, he had a point. There is nothing wrong with being in the middle. Glue is in the middle, holding disparate parts together. Priests are in the middle, holding God and the people together in an encounter with each other. Peacemakers are in the middle, helping warring parties make peace. To be in the middle is to engage in a ministry of reconciliation, led by the Risen Christ.

The word conflict is an interesting one. It means literally “to strike together.” Contemporary physics tells us that the stable Newtonian picture of the

universe is no more. Beneath what may seem stable are bubbling, boiling, appearing and disappearing, striking together, particles and strings. If this is reality at the most basic level, then we might suspect that all life as God created it to be, including all social life, requires conflict. Indeed, conflict is one of the core commitments of the Presbyterian Church. Conflict is what we teach people to handle through our endless committee meetings. Managed conflict is what we gave this nation through the Presbyterians who wrote the Federalist papers. Conflict is what birthed Gentiles becoming full-fledged members of Christ's church in Acts 15. Conflict is what Jesus faced among his disciples and in his encounters with the religious and political authorities when he announced the Realm of God and its demands for justice, mercy and faith. Surely we know that these blessed outcomes will only emerge through a conflicted birthing process?

When did our fear of conflict trump our commitment to be reformed and reforming, according to the word of God? When Presbyterian teaching elders and ruling elders lose their capacity to engage in positive conflict, toward the end of creative solutions, all is lost.

Jesus' third "not" statement is that he did not come to save the righteous but sinners. This statement on Jesus' part is ironic. After all we are all sinners; it is just some of us don't perceive ourselves to be. To be righteous is not to be sinless but to be in a right relationship bestowed by God and to seek first right relationships of justice, mercy and faith. We might amplify a bit and affirm that these are relationships of institutional justice (governments, non-government organizations, cultural organizations, and so on), individual acts of mercy, and openness to the future God is bringing to us. To be unrighteous is to be in broken, alienated, unhealthy relationships. Again, the fact is that all people are in unrighteous relationships to one degree or another, and this is the irony of Jesus' statement. He came for all of us, because God loves all of us in spite of our sinfulness. Yet a lot of us just don't get it. It is especially sad when church folks don't get it.

Rather than being concerned about right relationships, our congregations obsess about getting the "right" people to come to church: the young, prosperous, energetic people who are exactly like we perceived the church to be after the Second World War — in other words, "right" people like us except they no longer exist around our neighborhoods. I can tell you that in our Iowa

City congregation, God has sent us the “wrong people” — the gay and lesbian, the African and African-American, the Asian, the too old, the too young, the schizophrenic, the one-time homeless, the drug-addled, the drunk, the trailer trash. Many of them can barely afford to give a farthing. They are not the right people, but God sent them as a gift to us so that we might have right relationships with them.

Indeed, it feels to me that many of the other “not” statements made by Jesus relate to this one statement about righteousness. He tells his disciples to not forbid the children to come to him. He says don’t forbid the exorcist casting out demons in Jesus’ name. He says don’t fail to give hospitality to the least of these. He says don’t just stick with what you have, but go after lost sheep, coins and children.

Do you remember when Jesus healed the 10 lepers? How many came back to say thank you? Only one. I believe this is the essence of evangelism. We announce God’s good news in word and deed, and we heal nine from whom we hear nothing at all thereafter. We are blessed if one comes back to say thank you. Do you remember the story of the sower? Most seed does nothing, but those seeds which hit good soil do amazing things. This is the act of evangelism: We share the kingdom of God far and wide, and only a few embrace the vision — but it is more than enough to broadcast the vision broadly. We recruit many, some help us. Many are called, few are chosen.

Friends, I think Jesus, by the power of God’s Spirit, points out to us the way forward to revitalize our congregations, our presbyteries, our synods, our denomination, our world, ourselves — beginning with presbyteries. First, he calls us to convert, to be transformed, into servants. We are to end the power struggles brought by our greed and instead seek to empower, equip and encourage each other.

Second, Jesus expects us to engage conflict and even engender it because the larger task is to announce and embody the realm of God and its justice, mercy and faith. The quest for the realm invariably births twin rambunctious children whom we must love, those being change and conflict.

Third and finally, Jesus wants us to seek first right relationships and not pursue the right people who are merely a reflection of our own broken ego

needs. I think God in Christ lays out to us the way of life, the way of presbytery revitalization and global transformation. Let us choose it, and not death.