

Foreword

On February 5, 2012 the people of Christ Church, Waterloo began a three-Sunday journey toward a congregational vote on May 6 on questions around our congregation's ministry and welcome to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered (GLBT) persons. The questions themselves proceed from the national convention in July 2011 of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. At that convention, our congregation, conference, and synod delegates received the ELCIC Statement on Human Sexuality (see Main Menu) and passed into policy motions affirming full inclusion of GLBT Christians relating to the order of ministry and the blessing of same-gender relationships. As a result, ELCIC congregations are now in a position of responding to the national policy with what has been called the "local option". Our parish council is concerned that we take some time in considering our local option; that we engage in a process that will help us understand how and why questions around sexuality and sexual orientation are important for our common life as Christians; and that our vote on May 6 will be informed by study and reflection. This sermon begins our caring conversation, and will continue on March 4 (2. The Gift of the Gospel), and April 22 (3. The Gift of Our Questions).

On April 22, our focus will be on our questions. For our process to be a true "conversation" however, we invite written questions throughout the three-month period: your questions will sharpen and fine-tune our discussion. Please submit your questions using the question box on the Sanctuary table at the church, or send them by email to Pastor James using the link from the Contacts menu on our website.

On May 6 (4. The Gift of Choice), members of Christ Church will cast their votes by secret ballot at a congregational meeting held immediately following the service.

THE GIFT OF TIME APART

Caring Conversation 1

Epiphany 5 – Cycle B: Mark 1:29-39

The style of St. Mark the Evangelist is rather spare at the best of times, and the ten verses that form today's Gospel are no exception. If you remember last week's reading, Jesus and a few of his disciples visited the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus cast out what Mark described as an unclean spirit from a man who came into the synagogue at the end of the service. This is the background for the account we read today.

The incident in the synagogue was, we can assume, stressful: the unclean spirit challenged Jesus' power and then, to Jesus' dismay, named him as the Holy One of God. Jesus immediately rebuked the unclean spirit for this disclosure and commanded it to be silent. It was too late, though, because the congregation at the synagogue had already come to their own conclusions concerning Jesus. Mark tells us that the people noted that Jesus taught them as one who had authority, in complete contrast with the teaching they regularly received from the scribes. Add to this Jesus' casting out of the unclean spirit and the die was cast. Mark writes, "At once [Jesus'] fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." If Mark were writing in our time, he would probably say that after visiting the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus went viral.

Jesus and his disciples leave the synagogue and retreat to the privacy of Simon's home nearby, presumably for supper and an opportunity to debrief the day. But there is a contingency! Simon's mother-in-law has become seriously ill and the disciples ask Jesus to heal her. Their faith is showing: if he can heal someone with mental illness, surely he can heal someone with a physical illness. He does heal Simon's mother-in-law, and the language Mark uses to describe the miracle – Jesus "lifted her up" – suggests Jesus' own "rising up" for those of us who know the end of his story. But his curing Simon's mother-in-law only encourages the disciples to round up more people for Jesus to heal. Mark reports that "the whole city was gathered around the door [of Simon's house]." Jesus cures many who are sick and casts out many demons. Because of Mark's limited description, we are forced to read between the lines, concluding that Jesus was tired out and somewhat troubled by the events of the day. Mark writes that "in the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." He needed time apart, we conclude, to consider his gifts, his call to ministry, and the almost-overwhelming reaction he was receiving from people. With such a considerable emphasis on his healing

ministry, we can imagine his concern that his teaching ministry might be compromised; that people would be more interested in being healed than being taught. At the end of today's reading, we get the impression that Jesus is taking control of his mission. He says to the disciples, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." In other words, he benefitted from the time apart: he was able to consider what had gone well and what had perhaps gotten out of hand on his first day on the job. The second day would be different.

Interestingly, Mark often tells us that Jesus withdraws from the crowds and the disciples to pray and reflect on things. Even 2000 years later, we tend to minimize Jesus' humanity when we read the gospels and pray the creeds of the church. We acknowledge Jesus' full humanity, but we don't necessarily see him burdened or troubled by his call to ministry. Of course, the gospels are not short on information, but like Jesus' first century disciples, we tend to see what is exceptional in him, rather than what was ordinary – his full humanity, in other words. Jesus worried. Jesus wrestled with questions concerning his call. The church has interpreted his 40 days in the wilderness, following his baptism by John, as necessary proof of the doctrine concerning his being without sin. But what is actually portrayed is Jesus' wrestling with the call he received in the event of his baptism. Will he accept the call or reject it? Did it really happen or did he imagine it? How will he fare when he offends people with his new teachings? We often spiritualize Jesus so much that we fail to recognize that his gifts for ministry notwithstanding, none of it was easy. There was always resistance to his proclamation, something we see represented throughout the gospels, usually in the questions of the scribes and Pharisees. And so, it is not unusual in the gospel narratives to see Jesus withdraw to "a deserted place" or go up a mountain to pray; to slip away from the crowds, or to escape onto a boat. He needed time apart, and like Jesus, Christians over the millennia have also taken time apart to consider their call to ministry and discipleship, to reflect and read and pray. It is, in fact, part of the pattern of discipleship and, I expect, necessary for the life of discipleship. Our response to God's call to us in Jesus Christ is a considered response, considered during our times apart.

My feeling is that our consideration of the motions from the ELCIC national convention last July require time apart. We need an opportunity to consider *our* questions over and against the motions for full inclusion from our church in convention. Our synod bishop, the Rev. Michael Pryse, has said as much in a pastoral letter written in October to pastors and lay leaders. He suggested that we take time for education and conversation. And so, our congregation is taking Bishop Pryse's guidance and spending three months to examine where we are as a parish in our ministry of welcome to homosexual Christians. Each Sunday, we say all are welcome to Christ Church, but the motions passed last summer in Saskatoon call us to go deeper: they call us to consider our parish support for people in same-gender relationships of commitment and depth, relationships that correspond to the traditional marriage covenant. And the ELCIC motions call us to consider the eligibility for call to Christ Church of pastors who are homosexual – pastors no longer required by the church to be celibate; pastors who may have a spouse of the same gender.

These are not questions we are used to fielding and, quite frankly, they are not questions too many of us are able to answer without time apart. Three months seems like a short time, but I expect many, if not all of us, have considered our private response to homosexuality for years, perhaps a lifetime. Having the church lead our conversation, and then our responding as a caring faith community is different, however. It means, essentially, that we examine our Christianity in respect to the question of what has been termed "full inclusion." We ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" We have conversation with our friends in Christ who are gay and lesbian, listening to how they hear the gospel. We read our church's statement on human sexuality in order to understand the conditions that prepared the changes in our national church policy.

My time apart began 40 years ago. I was at a birthday party with church friends and, for whatever reason, I decided to amuse people by affecting effemininity. Within seconds, one of the men at the party took me aside and said, "James, did it ever occur to you that some of these people you ridicule are your close friends?" Needless to say, it took a significant time apart for the full impact and meaning of that moment to sink in; but what it removed for me immediately was the safe distance of "us" and "them" that so easily works its way into our conversations, keeping them from being caring. Joe put his friendship with me on the line that night: essentially he came out (as we say) at a time when the stakes were considerably higher than they are now. But everyone at the party was member of our church and probably because of Joe's faith in the gospel, he risked himself with a fellow Christian.

Our synod's conversations around homosexuality had many of the same dynamics at their inception. The late Pastor Ed Hackbusch would stand at the microphone at every synod convention I attended from about 1980 on asking the assembly to recognize that we were not a church of heterosexuals; that we had members of both heterosexual and homosexual orientation, and that our ministry to people who were homosexual was virtually non-existent. When Michael Pryse became our synod bishop, I was on his first synod council. He asked the councillors at that first meeting to open the question of our ministry to gays and lesbians. Our formal time apart with questions around homosexuality dates from the mid-1990s and that seminal conversation Bishop Pryse had with Synod Council. Two or three years later, our own church council asked our Adult Education Committee to lead a number of book studies on Christian homosexuality so that our members could have caring conversations with one another within the context of our faith. We have offered at least four book studies, but only about 5% of our congregation has attended over the years.

The time apart that we begin today involves our whole community. I invite you into the journey. I ask that you remember Jesus' own self-questioning during those many times apart we read about. I encourage you to read, pray, reflect, study, care, and participate in our conversation. And give our congregation your questions, using the question box on the Sanctuary table or the email link to Pastor James on our church website. It can only be a conversation if we hear many voices.