

Something of Substance
Mark 1:14-20, Jonah 1:1:3-10
January 22, 2012

I.

At the end of this sermon Patty Hourin, chair of our St. Thomas Roundtable, will speak briefly about the Roundtable's work. And it is appropriate that she do so today. The readings we just heard fit right into some of our Roundtable discussions.

What is the purpose of the church in the world? More specifically, what is the purpose of St. Thomas here in the community? Are we fulfilling that purpose? Should we do anything different?

A basic principle the Roundtable has followed since its first meeting in June is that we discern and do God's will for us. And because the church, in the world and in Diamondhead, is the body Christ left behind to carry on his work, doing God's will means following Jesus.

However, we probably would agree that over the centuries the church in the world has not always been motivated by following Jesus. History shows there are times when the church has served itself rather than serving our Lord.

And people remember that. Bad examples get publicity, while good examples are forgotten. It's the classic case of how a few bad apples can spoil the entire barrel.

That presents a challenge with which our Roundtable has been grappling from the beginning. Even though we try our best to faithfully worship God, minister to each other in Christ's name, and take God's truth into the community, we still are faced with people's doubts about whether they want to be part of an organized church. How do we overcome those concerns?

I will come back to these questions in a few minutes after we consider two of our readings. The teachings of these stories can help us formulate some answers.

II.

We'll start with the Old Testament reading about the prophet Jonah. The Lord told Jonah to go the great city of Nineveh and prophesy that the city would be destroyed because of the wickedness of the people. And as background, Nineveh was an extremely large and ancient city north of Israel built by one of Noah's great-grandsons (Gen. 10:8-11).

Jonah, however, did not want to go to Nineveh, so he boarded a ship going the opposite direction to get away. But God brought a great storm upon the sea, and Jonah went overboard and was swallowed by a big fish. Some traditions say it was a whale. While he was in the belly of the fish Jonah prayed and repented, and three days later the fish regurgitated Jonah on dry land.

Imagine a headline that said "Man Swallowed by Whale for Three Days, Spit Back Out!" Where might you see that? Probably in the check-out line at Rouse's. We wouldn't take it very seriously, would we?

But there is more to the story. The Lord spoke to Jonah again, and this time Jonah did what God said. He learned the hard way that he could not run from God's call to do his work.

And in contrast to Jonah, Mark's Gospel told about the calling of Andrew, Peter, James, and John to be Jesus' disciples. And they did not hesitate for a moment. They dropped everything and went immediately. Jesus said, "Follow me," and they followed. They did not even ask where he was going, or how long they would be gone.

And perhaps they already were familiar with Jesus and might already have met him. Jesus didn't just drop out of the sky that day. He grew up not far away. This was a small geographic region, and most people probably knew something about each other or their families.

Even so, it's a remarkable story. These four men were not looking for something else to do. They were busy with their fishing businesses. They already had promising futures ahead of them. According to tradition, Peter and Andrew owned several fishing boats. And James and John were part of a family fishing business that had additional men working for them.

Yet, they responded to Jesus. They did not run away as Jonah did. They were called and they answered. They followed Jesus in the greatest story, the greatest adventure, there ever was.

III.

That adventure continues today. The calling of the disciples was the beginning of the messianic community that now is the Christian church in the world. And in Christ's name the church has proclaimed salvation for believers, has taught Christ's love to the downtrodden, has ministered to the needy, and has been a sanctuary where people can deepen their relationship with God.

In fact, imagine what the world would be like if there was no church. The Bible as we know it would not have been written and preserved through the centuries. Jesus' teachings would not have become the standard for Christian living. There would be no community of the faithful to minister to each other. There would be no framework to facilitate God's plan for humanity.

Why doesn't that understanding come through to everyone? When we consider the significance of salvation and the blessings of Christian life, we almost could wonder why coming to church isn't a no-brainer. Why isn't the world beating down our doors to get in and worship with us?

One reason is that people just don't know what we can mean in their lives. That's our responsibility. We probably could do a better job of telling them. Another reason is the negative perception about the church I mentioned earlier.

While the church Jesus started is perfectly divine in origin, it necessarily is managed by imperfect people. The church can make mistakes even though people try their best to keep it holy. And that can lead doubters to a spiritually dangerous belief that they don't need Christ's church. They either think they already have the answers, or else cannot find any here.

A typical example is a current video on YouTube that has gone viral. It was posted on January 10, and as of yesterday had been viewed over fifteen million times and favorably commented upon by over a quarter of a million people.

It's a four minute monologue by a clean-cut young fellow about why he hates religion but loves Jesus. He says they are polar opposites. And for me the video is frustrating. It contains many inaccuracies, and is mostly a rant against the church rather than a thoughtful statement about how Jesus transforms our lives.

But so what? What if I can show that it's poor scholarship or shallow thinking? For that young man it's true, and there are many like him. And skepticism about the church is not limited to the youth. People of all ages are staying away from church for similar reasons.

IV.

So, what do we do? How do we change that? Obviously, we cannot please everyone. Some people criticize the church simply to justify their own spiritual laziness. They feel no call to faith, and are not asking questions or seeking answers. They would be hardest to reach.

But many others are open to faith. Perhaps they were active in church but have fallen away. Many young people right now seek an anchor to ground them in a broken and unfair world.

And the great irony is that in this information age, people don't have the information. In this time of unlimited access to knowledge, their knowledge is incomplete. The facts are there, but they don't have the facts. Truth is replaced by clichés, slogans, and wishful thinking.

That problem is our responsibility. The church has to solve it. The world will not do it for us. And we have to address it in Diamondhead. Diamondhead will not do it for us. Our Roundtable has been discussing it, and we pray that our entire congregation will engage it.

And here is the crux of the matter. Certainly we have visitors on Sunday, and are welcoming and friendly to them while they are here. And certainly we can emphasize the importance of encouraging our friends and neighbors to join us.

But we also must offer something of substance to them. They didn't come only for a social hour. And that "something" is the sincerity of our worship, the depth of our spirituality, the visibility of our love of Jesus Christ, and the ways in which those all are shared.

Those are the truths that can fill the hearts of people who come through our doors seeking something more in their lives. It's one thing for people to come and see and be welcomed. That's good. It's a start. But we also want them to come and stay and be fulfilled.

I believe we do a good job with that. Approximately one half of the people here on any Sunday became active worshippers after Hurricane Katrina. You came and you stayed. And if our first priority is to bring people to faith in Christ and share in our worship, we are on the right track.

V.

I ask you to think about this for a moment. We have heard about the golden age of many things; the golden age of art, or literature, or music. One of my favorite documentaries is about the golden age of baseball.

But no one talks about the golden age of the church, do they? That's because the church has not had one. Even though the church can point to a tradition of magnificent inspiration and leadership I mentioned earlier, it began with a scattering of the disciples, followed by years of persecution, and then, as it became established, came moments of departure from God's will.

And so the golden age of the church is yet to come. God's kingdom is more evident each day, but it still is on the way. That is our promise and our Christian hope.

This image applies to St. Thomas, but differently. While we have had good times, and have avoided some unrighteous pitfalls of the larger church, we have struggled at times with unity of purpose and resources for mission. We can say with hope that our golden age also is yet to come.

And it can be closer than we think. We can make it happen. Right now, people in the community are looking for something of substance in which they can believe and can follow. We can help them find it and connect with meaning beyond themselves.

Jesus offered that to the disciples, and through him we can offer it now. In an uncertain world our Lord is the light that shows the way, and he calls us to shine that light in people's lives.

I would urge us to continue to tell people about our church and invite them to come and see. And I pray that with the help of the Roundtable we can be a spiritual light in the community. Just as Jesus changed everything for Peter, Andrew, James, and John, his transforming power can be continued through our community of faith. *Amen.*