

1.30.2022, Epiphany 4

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Jeremiah. 1:4-10 Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

“163 Years of Speaking the Truth”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Tomorrow is the 163<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the founding of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. St. Mark’s was organized on the evening of Monday, January 31, 1859 at the Charlotte Courthouse with sixteen charter members. St. Mark’s was founded by Dr. G.D. (Gotthardt Dellman) Bernheim (1827-1916), who was pastor of St. John’s in Cabarrus County.

Reflecting on the founding of St. Mark’s Dr. Bernheim wrote in 1902, “I must say that time was opportune for the undertaking, the exact moment had come, two years later the Civil War broke out, and who can tell whether even ten or twenty years afterwards an enterprise would have met with success. The Lord prospered the undertaking from the beginning to the present time, although very many difficulties had to be overcome.”

Berheim’s last sentence is significant: “The Lord prospered the undertaking from the beginning to the present time, although very many difficulties had to be overcome.” As we remember the 163<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of St. Mark’s, we give thanks to God who has helped St. Mark’s overcome many difficulties so that this church might grow in every chapter of its life.

As we think about St. Mark’s in mission today, we also remember Jesus speaking in his own home synagogue in Nazareth. Today’s gospel is a continuation of last week’s gospel reading in which Jesus read these words from the prophet Isaiah, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” When Jesus began his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth he spoke the truth about God’s steadfast love for all people.

Today’s gospel begins with the words, “*Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’*” Imagine the excitement of those who were listening. Jesus declared that God’s mission to the poor, the weak, the sick and the forgotten had been fulfilled! Luke tells us that everyone spoke well of Jesus, amazed at his words of grace. Jesus’ words of good news for the poor, the sick and oppressed continue to capture our imagination today.

Yet what happened after Jesus spoke to his home synagogue? Why did people become so upset? People quickly became angry because Jesus told them the truth about themselves. When Jesus

declared that prophets are unwelcome among their own people, he was telling them the truth that God had sent prophets to speak God's word of grace and truth, and yet Israel had chosen not to listen and not to act. Jesus reminded them that Elijah and Elisha could do no great works except only to outsiders and foreigners – to Gentiles.

This is what angered his hometown synagogue: Jesus broke the illusion that they could listen to words of grace without having to act upon them. Jesus was telling them that God's grace is not simply "gracious words," but a living reality of steadfast love that Jesus had come to fulfill and act upon.

Imagine being told something so often about ourselves that we believe it, even though it isn't true. Everyone knew the words of the prophet Isaiah about good news for the poor, release for the captive, healing for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. Everyone knew these words of grace, but Jesus unmasked their hypocrisy at thinking that simply hearing these words is enough. Jesus said, I have come to fulfill these words in your hearing. Jesus came to act upon these words.

What really enraged them was that Jesus reminded them of the truth that God worked in Elijah and Elisha to minister to Gentiles, people who were outsiders and foreigners. In an instant they rose up and drove Jesus out of town, intending to kill him.

Jesus was right. He said, "*Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.*" People don't like being told they have been wrong, that they haven't fulfilled God's mission, and that God loves the foreigner and the outsider, Gentiles and people all over the world.

Jesus knew what he was doing. He unmasked his hometown friends in their hypocrisy by telling them that God's mission to the poor and oppressed, the sick and the forgotten is not simply about speaking "gracious words" or platitudes, rather, God's mission is very real and God expects his people to fulfill this mission to all people in the world.

There is no evidence that Jesus ever returned to his hometown of Nazareth, yet like a prophet he is called, "Jesus of Nazareth." In John's gospel (19:19), Pilate even had a sign placed on Jesus' cross, saying, "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,*" bringing into focus Jesus' identity as one who was rejected so that he could save all people. Jesus, the prophet, king and priest was pushed out of his hometown, so that he could be pushed out of the world onto a cross, fulfilling the good news for God's love for all the world.

The good news of Jesus is not simply meant to be gracious words spoken on Sunday morning, rather it is a lifetime of discipleship to Jesus for others. In hearing words of grace, we are to

embody grace in lives of care, compassion and justice for the weak and the forgotten. Jesus spoke the truth about God's love for the world – that God invites us to incarnate this love in our lives.

Paul's words about love in 1 Corinthians are perhaps the most well-known words about love ever written. Paul understood what it meant to have rejected Jesus and persecuted the church. Paul also knew what it meant to be recreated in the love and forgiveness of Jesus. For Paul, love is a verb. Love needs to be acted upon for it to exist in the world. Otherwise, love is simply an idea. Paul writes, "*if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*" Love is a verb; it is the engine that drives our life of faith.

Today we mark 163 years of mission and hear Jesus' words spoken to his home synagogue as also spoken to us. As St. Mark's founder Dr. Bernheim wrote, God has helped St. Mark's from the beginning to the present, overcoming many difficulties. Yet Jesus' experience in his hometown shows us the need to overcome the greatest of difficulties – overcoming ourselves. Our own sense of pride and self-centeredness, of who is an "insider" and who is on the "outside." A moment ago we confessed our own sinful brokenness with the words, "We have rejected your word when it made us confront ourselves." Over and over throughout our lives, we are confronted by our own sinfulness and our need of grace. Our greatest difficulty is overcoming ourselves so that we are able to speak and act with love for our neighbor.

We come to church to hear the good news of God's love for each of us and for the world. We confess our sinful brokenness so that the grace of God's love might overcome us again, so that over and over, we might leave this sanctuary as disciples in God's mission of love to the world.

Overcoming ourselves – denying ourselves – and following Jesus, is the most difficult thing, because we can't do it without him. The love of Jesus is the bridge to our neighbor.

For 163 years St. Mark's has been speaking the truth about God's love. The truth is that we cannot be in mission, we cannot overcome difficulties, without first allowing God's grace to overcome and transform ourselves.

Today's gospel ends "and Jesus went on his way." Jesus is always moving outward in his mission of love for the world. Jesus went on *his way* in mission and he invites us into discipleship in the direction he travels in mission outward to our neighbors.

Follow him. For 163 years God's grace has overcome all difficulties so that together we might continue to fulfill Christ's mission to the world.

Follow him. Embody his love. Live as good news for others. Amen.