



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Passing the Plates”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Mark 5: 25-34; Luke 2: 25-38

February 4, 2018

This scene of the baby Jesus coming into the temple with Mary and Joseph is one we don't tend to hear about too often, and it's one that involves characters that really don't appear outside of this moment. But, in some ways, that reality is what struck me as we came into our communion service this morning.

This event takes place as part of the purification rituals that are outlined in the Law. Women were seen to be unclean for a period after the birth of the child, and this purification process was part of their re-entry into the public and religious life of the community. The timing, the elements, even the sacrifice to be offered are delineated in the Law, and Mary and Joseph are entering the temple for precisely that purpose. So, Jesus is a little over a month old at this point, and when they come into temple, we encounter Simeon and Anna.

Now, we know very little about either of these individuals. Neither of them appears anywhere else in Scripture, and with the exception of a little bit on lineage, we're really told very little about them. What we see in both of them, however, is the same three things.

1. They encounter Christ.
2. They rejoice in his presence, and
3. They begin to proclaim the glory of the Good News.

In both cases, that's really all we know about these individuals. We don't know a lot about where they came from, we know a very little about Anna's life in that she was a widow, and we don't follow these individuals anywhere else in Scripture. All we really know about Simeon and Anna is that they encountered the infant Jesus, they rejoiced in his presence, and they began to proclaim and tell others of the glory of the Good News. And, it was that simple process that drew me back to that story of the hemorrhaging woman reaching out to Jesus in the middle of the crowded street.

It's a story familiar, I'm sure, to many of us, but it is one I have always found fascinating. Mark places this story near the edge of the sea, where Jesus had gotten off the boat and was confronted by a man whose daughter was on the brink of death. The man pleads with Jesus to come and

save his daughter, so Jesus agrees and begins to make his way towards the home of this the man. The crowds follow. As Jesus makes his way down the street, certainly with some sense of urgency as this man rushes Jesus to bedside of his dying daughter, in comes this woman who has been suffering from uncontrollable bleeding for 12 years. The physical, emotional and social pain must have been unbearable. And that woman, suffering in that way, is so convinced of the power of Jesus to bring healing into her life, so confident in what he can do to her, that she musters up the will and the strength to battle the crowds, to push through the people, and to just get the slightest touch of his cloak. If she can just do that, she is convinced, she will be healed.

Now, we know from the story that Jesus feels the power drawn from him, turns to the woman, celebrates her faith, and sends her on her way healed. But, what really jumped out to me, this week, was the basis on which this woman came to that confidence in the power Jesus could have over her life. Just before telling us of her profound belief that just a touch of his cloak could bring healing to her suffering, Mark tells us that all of this is happening because, “She had heard about Jesus!”

That’s a remarkable detail in my mind.

- There’s nothing here that says that this woman had experienced the presence of Jesus in some way.
- There’s nothing here indicating that she had some sort of divinely inspired vision or dream that convinced of what could come if she sought him out.
- There’s nothing that even suggests she had personally witnessed his healing in the lives of others.

No, her conviction, her profound act of faith, her courage to seek out the love and healing of Jesus in her life, came not from personal experience, from divine inspiration, or from evidence she had seen, but from the words of another (probably many others) who had told her what Jesus might mean in her life! In other words, this woman’s healing happened because someone else had encountered Jesus, rejoiced in the glory of his presence in their lives, and then proclaimed the wonder and joy of the Good News to her. This woman found healing, because someone told her that healing might come from God in Jesus Christ.

I want you to think about something that is going to happen in this room in just a few minutes. There is an incredibly subtle, but remarkably powerful, act that happens in communion every month. We start at the table, the feast of grace and love to which Jesus has invited each of us, we pray, we confess, we take solace in his grace, and then we are served. As we hand the plates to the Deacons, they proceed to bring the plates out and serve the congregation. As you receive the plate, however, you pass it to your neighbor, who receives it from you, who passes it on to another, and so forth. There is a profound symbolism in the fact that these elements that represent the wondrous grace and mercy of Christ are spread not straight from the table to each of you, and not even directly from the rightly ordained Ministers of the church, but from one person to the next, sharing the love the love Christ with one another as the plates are passed.

Now, I know that this all starts to come dangerously close to that terrifying notion of ‘evangelism.’ And, by no means am I suggesting that any of us should be knocking on random doors or shouting fire and brimstone outside the Bradley Center at the start of the next Bucks’

game. But, the simple reality is that the vast majority of the people in this room are here, today, because someone who had been touched by the love of Christ gave you some sort of invitation to experience the same. It may have been a friend, it may have been a colleague, and many of our cases it was our parents – but the vast majority of the people who know faith as a part of their lives don't know it because they accidentally tripped and found themselves face down in an open Bible. The vast majority of the people who know the love of God in their lives know it because someone knew it before them and was willing to share it.

From John the Baptist paving the way, to Simeon and Anna proclaiming the Good News, to that woman desperately reaching for Jesus' cloak, to the Disciples preaching the Gospel, to Philip explaining the Scriptures to that Ethiopian Eunuch, our faith is one that has repeatedly been discovered, rejoiced in, and then shared with others in this world. And we here, today, because someone before us was willing to share it with us, and because someone before that was ready to share it with them.

I'm not suggesting we need to go pounding the pavement and confronting every stranger we see, nor that we should be blithely asking every one of our colleagues and friends where they go to church. What I am suggesting, however, is that we are those who have encountered the wonder and love of Christ, we are those who have gathered to rejoice in his presence, and there are people in our lives who undoubtedly could glean comfort and peace from the love of God in this very moment. What I'm suggesting, is that, perhaps, there are those in our lives to whom we ought to consider passing the plate – and that, perhaps, we ought to be just a little more ready to do that when the moment arrives.