

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Astounded Beyond Measure

Mark 7:24-37 • Communion

Several years ago, Bono, the lead singer of the popular group U2 spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast. He briefly told his faith story, a not unfamiliar tale of a love-hate relationship with the church. Like many people, perhaps many of us from time to time, he saw the church as irrelevant, judgmental, hypocritical, particularly when it came to dealing with the poor and the sick.

“I remember how my mother would bring us to chapel on Sundays” Bono said, “and my father used to wait outside. One of the things that I picked up from my father and my mother was the sense that religion often gets in the way of God. For me, at least, it got in the way. Seeing what religious people, in the name of God, did to my native land... in fact, all over the world, seeing the self-righteousness roll down like a mighty stream from certain corners of the religious establishment... I must confess, I changed the channel... Even though I was a believer. Perhaps because I was a believer.”¹

But something changed Bono’s mind about the church. Not completely, mind you, because I get the sense that he is still somewhat cynical. Yet I also sense that he is wildly caught up in the movement of God’s spirit around the world. And that movement touches on this morning’s scripture. Because God is not limited to working through the church. But the church, if it is to be the church, is surely limited to working under the power of God’s spirit.

In today’s two biblical stories we see Jesus outside the bounds of Israel, healing foreigners that even he, at first, seemed to have reservations about. That surely indicates that God is not constrained to boundaries we so easily take for granted. Jesus’ conversation with that Syrophenician woman is troubling, but revealing. She confronted him with her faith, a faith beyond his expectation, a faith unlike he had encountered in Israel. Impressed, perhaps even astounded beyond measure by her boldness, Jesus healed her daughter, a startling sign of God’s spirit at work in a foreign land.

Then Jesus left Phoenicia and returned to Israel, but not to the Jewish part. The Decapolis, the region of ten cities, was Roman country. Once again, Jesus is challenged by people of faith who ask him to heal a deaf man. They brought a man to him whose speech was impaired, I assume, by his deafness. And Jesus healed him. In doing so he left the people around him amazed at his power. “He has done everything well;” they said, “he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” Again a sure sign of God’s power at work in ways that people didn’t think possible.

Backtrack to that National Press Club speech. “A number of years ago,” Bono said, “I met a wise man who changed my life. In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord’s blessing. I was saying, you know, I have a new song, look after it. I have a family, please look after them... And this wise man said: stop. He said, stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Get involved in what God is doing - because it’s already blessed. Well, God, as I said, is with the poor. That, I believe, is what God is doing. And that is what he’s calling us to do.”

¹ Paul David Hewson, a.k.a. Bono, Speech to the National Prayer Breakfast, published in Sojourn, A weekly email-zine of spirituality, politics, and culture, February 3, 2006.

God is at work around us, but you and I have difficulty catching sight of that because of our secular orientation. Truth be told you and I as Christians have been raised in a society that has a non-religious explanation for everything. Because of that we hardly recognize anything as God's work. Who, for example, recognizes the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union as acts of God? Yet the dramatic social changes going on at that time, the rise of Solidarity in Poland, the free elections in Hungary, and the break-up of the Soviet Union itself are clear evidence of the power of God at work. Yes, you can find political explanations as well, but underneath all those other explanations lies the power of God to change history.

Closer to home we've seen the Coalition of Immokalee Workers make significant progress in their struggle for higher wages for migrant workers. They've succeeded well in their continuing battle to end human trafficking and actual slavery in Immokalee. Some in the church were upset a few years ago with Presbyterian support for a boycott of Taco Bell. Yet that boycott resulted in a settlement with Taco Bell and prompted successful negotiations with McDonalds, Burger King and others. Too bad Publix is dragging its feet. And all this time I thought Publix was a company with a humanitarian heart. Oh well, they'll come around soon, I hope. The Coalition's successes are a sign of the spirit of God at work bringing hope to people in often-hopeless situations.

A recent article in the WGPU Expressions magazine reported on a program to mentor female foster children who are turning 18 and thus no longer eligible for foster care. Usually they are "turned out into society with... little promise of education, career, support, guidance, or safety."² But about 8 years ago, Judi Woods, a Fort Myers Beach businesswoman began a mentoring program called *Footsteps to the Future*. It begins working with girls when they are 14 years old. In addition to building important trust relationships with the girls, the mentors "share sorrows and joys. They also counsel the young women in all areas: budgeting, negotiating rental leases, education, mental health coaching, setting and meeting goals and even parenting."³ "Since the organization started they have mentored 32 girls. Today they are helping about 20." Surely God's spirit is behind such a healing and hopeful effort.

In our lifetimes we have seen remarkable social transformation. Many in this room remember Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Now we have a President of African American descent, although some people have trouble accepting that. The Special Olympics founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver has dramatically altered the way people of different abilities are viewed, although we have a ways to go on that one as well. The challenge for us is to recognize God's hand at work in those changes while at the same time knowing that not all change is God's will.

I'm quite sure the partisanship dividing this country is not God's will. I'm quite sure that the all too casual attitude toward abortion among some people is not God's will. I'm quite sure the violence and hate-speech of the anti-abortion movement is not God's will. I'm quite sure the Gay-bashing that continues among many is not God's will. I'm quite sure that terrorism is not God's will. I'm quite sure that torture is not God's will. I'm quite sure that ignoring the poverty, hunger, housing and health needs of people is not God's will. And if we who are the children of God do not speak out to bring healing to those who are broken by such behavior, who will?

But the good news is: Jesus has opened our eyes to God's Spirit at work. Christ has opened our ears and touched our tongues setting us free to speak good news. Now as we get involved in what God is doing, we will be blessed, as Bono said. What God is doing is already blessed. Jesus healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter. He cured the deaf man's hearing and his speech. And all those who realized what was going on right before their eyes were astounded beyond measure.

² Cathy Chestnut, *Fostering Independence*, Expressions, June 2009 Issue, 11.

³ Ibid.