

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Third Sunday after Epiphany- January 21, 2024

Scripture lesson: Mark 1:14-20

ON THE MOVE WITH JESUS

This First Congregational Church has been in ministry since 1833, nearly two hundred years. Count me impressed. You must surely be one of the longest serving churches in the entire state of Michigan, especially given the fact that Michigan became a state in 1837!

How many ups and downs, twists, and turns you've had during these nearly two centuries, God only knows. I know that recently in these few years of my time with you, you've been through plenty. Yet through them all God has given you and you've embraced abundant opportunities for service to each other, to the Grand Blanc community, and to God's whole, wide world. Despite the ongoing challenges of them, I know too that you look forward to the fresh opportunities that God will give you as Pastor Landis arrives and you work with him to establish a new vision for your ministry in these coming years.

In other words, this congregation has long been called, and you still are called to be "on the move with Jesus". The lectionary Scripture passage we've just heard from St. Mark's gospel providentially gives us some key reminders of what that means.

All four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell Jesus' story as a journey tale. This is especially true of Mark whose gospel the lectionary gives us to read most often during this church year. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is always "on the move" doing this and then that and then immediately pressing on to somewhere and something else.

Immediately is one of Mark's favorite words. In his telling, Jesus' disciples are repeatedly and breathlessly trying to keep up or catch up. They seem always to be at least one step behind as Jesus moves on. For instance . . .

In today's reading, Jesus calls his first disciples. Unlike other rabbis of his time who never recruited their followers, Jesus did. He actively called people to be his disciples- wanting them before they wanted him, choosing them before they chose him, and believing in them before they believed in him.

So, as he walks along the Sea of Galilee, he sees fishermen brothers Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the water. He calls out to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Immediately, they leave their nets and follow.

Jesus moves further up the road. He sees fishermen brothers James and John mending their nets, and immediately calls out to them. Immediately, they leave their nets, their father, and their family business and follow.

You would think they might ask, "Well, who are you that we should follow?" or "OK, but can you at least tell us where you're going?" But they don't do any of that. They simply drop everything and follow.

In Mark's gospel, that's what discipleship is like. It's setting out on a journey with Jesus, not knowing who he is or where he's going. All that the disciples know from the start is that with him they'll be on the move- just as you all have been and will continue to be. Furthermore . . .

Midway through his story, Mark tells of Jesus' disciples heading out in a boat onto the Sea of Galilee. A storm kicks up and the sea turns nasty. The disciples struggle mightily just to keep their boat afloat.

Then, suddenly, who do they see? It's Jesus. Mark says that he walks on the water towards them. He doesn't come out to rescue them, even though he eventually does.

Instead, Mark portrays Jesus as out for a stroll. He is out and about on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a storm. Mark's Jesus is always on the move, even onto a storm-tossed sea.

At the end of his gospel, Mark then tells of some of Jesus' women followers going to his tomb on Easter morning. They arrive early and are greeted by "a young man in white" who says to them, "You're looking for Jesus? Sorry, but he's not here. He is risen and has already gone ahead of you into Galilee. Go and catch up with him there."

In the earliest copies of Mark's gospel, the story stops right there. The women flee from the tomb, amazed and afraid, and they say nothing to anyone. They had thought Jesus' crucifixion meant that their journey with him was finally over. But now he's alive again and has moved on.

Should they try to catch up? If so, what will it mean? Jesus was dead but is alive again and is calling to them once more. If they follow him this time, where will he take them?

The same question faces all of you as you anticipate your life together in these coming years. You, like the first disciples, are making your journey with Jesus. Like with them, he has wanted, chosen, and believed in you before you've wanted, chosen, and believed in him. But seeing the words that greet you every time you come down the hallway toward this sanctuary, you're reminded that now you have chosen him. You are indeed his disciples who want to change the world to God's glory by faithfully living his teachings. As you do that now, where is he taking you?

As with his first disciples, he's calling you, me, and all his followers to new life beyond every death, new life beyond every accustomed arrangement and settled routine. That's why, like the women arriving first at Jesus' tomb, we know what it's like to be amazed and afraid. In the journey with Jesus, he always welcomes us just as we are, but he won't leave us just as we are.

He keeps moving ahead, calling us to catch up, to stay in step, to grow and deepen in our life with him. We all know that, frankly, this is often hard to do. To keep growing as a follower of Jesus Christ means constantly putting his love command at the front and center of our lives. "Love each other as I have loved you", he says. Which, of course, always sounds nice enough, but the New Testament puts teeth into it.

It's always sobering to recall even a basic sample. According to the Scriptures, the love of Jesus calls us to be selfless enough to wash each other's feet, to live in harmony, to be devoted to one another, to judge not, lest we be judged, to accept each other as Christ has accepted us, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the imprisoned, and to welcome the stranger.

Don't be envious, the Scriptures say. Admonish one another but speak the truth in love. Be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving of each other just as God in Christ forgives us. Regard other people as more important than we are.

Comfort and encourage one another. Love even our enemies. Consider how to stimulate each other to greater deeds of love and service. Don't complain.

Be patient with and pray for one another. Bear each other's burdens. Clothe ourselves with humility. Don't insult a brother or sister. Be reconciled.

That's only a basic sample, but it's more than enough for a lifetime of growth for disciples of Jesus Christ.

And since the journey with him demands our growth, it always threatens to wear us out. It can grind on us more than other trips do simply because it *must always be done with other people*. The journey with Jesus moves only by his love and with his love lots of other people are always *necessarily* part of the deal.

On a long trip with others, we know that things won't always be smooth, easy, or to our liking. There can be disagreements about how best to make the trip, doubts about the wisdom of the leaders, disputes over how best to interpret the directions. Long stretches of the scenery can be boring or frightening. The accommodations won't always suit everyone's tastes. The pace can seem too swift to some and too slow to others. Tempers can flare.

On long trips we get to see each other at our best *and* our worst. Journeying with Jesus, we discover that this is true both with our sisters and brothers in the church and with all of God's children outside of it. Yet through thick and thin, we're determined to stay the course. We're resolved to keep moving with Jesus.

Committed to keeping up and sticking close to where he goes, we realize that we can do it only if we take good care. On long trips we need to eat right, sleep well, and get steady exercise. We need to take care of the daily disciplines that help us to keep energized and focused rather than become worn out and frayed.

The same is true on the journey with Jesus. He has given us the disciplines that he himself followed, the spiritual practices that help to keep us moving and in step with him. Regular worship with each other, prayerful silence and solitude, spiritual friendship, study and meditation, self-examination and confession, devoted acts of loving service- these are among the most basic and important. All of them provide the good food and drink, exercise, and rest that we need to keep moving with Jesus.

His journey moves only by his love. In his love, he calls and offers the light that can lead us through every death into new life. At the same time, our movement with him is never forced. With him, we can always go our separate ways.

God has made us free, so we can, at will, turn, wander, and drift away. We can neglect the disciplines, get distracted, and go soft so that we can't keep up. We can fall behind, maybe even drop out. Or we can decide simply to keep our distance and merely admire from afar. It's always up to us.

BUT . . . what can help us to stay on course, maintain our discipline, and keep moving with Jesus? We need to be always mindful of this: when we journey with Jesus, we *enter the life that really is life*.

With him, we immerse ourselves in God's life. It's the life of the God who is love and who has made us in God's own image. This means that we find our truest, deepest, and richest fulfillment only in loving like God does. As disciples of Jesus, we know this to our core. In following him, we move with God.

Where he'll take us, we don't always know. He'll keep us on the move. He'll lead us to peaks and valleys, high points and low. But wherever he takes us, we know, above all, that his life in God's love will always shine bright and true. It's the life that will lead us beyond every death into new life. As his disciples, we learn that this is all we ever really need.

In these coming years then with Pastor Landis, and in every year beyond, let it be your prayer as the dear people of this beloved church that no matter where Jesus leads you, a closer walk with him will always be your choice. Amen.