

June 21, 2009

Mark 4:35-41

“A Scary Skipper”

Sunday, June 7th, I attended the first of three days of our regional yearly denominational meeting: The Annual Conference session of Northern Illinois Conference. Three lay members we elected attended also: Kim Starr, Doug Ruth, and Betty Erickson.

Annual Conference is filled with amazing worship opportunities, fascinating reports, voting on legislation, and times of great tedium, all mixed together.

One of the exciting moments was hearing about the twenty new ministry sites that our Conference has established. We prayed for those ministries, and for the pastors and leaders at those sites.

The twenty new ministry sites are one component of a goal of our Conference called “Harvest 2020”. Jesus talked about the world being “ready for harvest” and in need of workers to make that harvest a reality. Our conference set a goal of having 20 new ministry sites by the year 2020. An accompanying goal is for existing churches to increase their average weekend worship attendance 20%. Our average attendance reported for the year of 2008 was about 280 worshippers. To increase 20% by 2020, we need to grow that number to 336. Do you think that is possible?

Mark Water, writing in a book on world religions provides us some troubling statistics: ***In 1960, with a world population of 3 billion people, 30% professed the Christian faith. By 1990, with a world population of 5.3 billion, this was reduced to 29%. If present trends continue, in 2010, when the world population is expected to be 7 billion, only 27% of these people will be Christians.***

Friends, remember the mission of the church? Every church is bound to the mission stated by Jesus Christ before his ascension: To make disciples for Christ and to do this in all the world.

Countless Christians are carrying out this command. There are revivals and evangelistic outreach of all kinds, on all the continents on the earth. There are new “ministry sites” in all kinds of neighborhoods, in coffee shops and shopping malls. Be assured that there **is** an overall increase every year in the

number of people who declare themselves as Christians. The number is growing—but the world population is increasing at a faster rate, so the portion of Christians in the world is decreasing.

Will Willimon, pastor, preacher and author remembers preaching in a large downtown church in a major Canadian city:

As the pastor and I were preparing for the service in his study, I asked him about the mood of his congregation on their 100th year. He turned to me and said simply, “Scared”.

Not one member of the congregation lives within walking distance of the ... anymore. And if anyone did, no one would risk it. The neighborhood is a dangerous place... A choir loft that once was full is almost empty except for five or six paid singers, paid from the church’s shrinking endowment. Over half the pews were unoccupied that Sunday. An undeniable somberness...settled over the congregation. The pastor had it right. It was fear.

This fear is present in most mainline Protestant denominations today. Could it be that our best days are past, that we may not have what it takes to weather the storm of our time and cultural realities?

In today’s gospel Jesus and his disciples are in a storm as well. They have launched out at night, a dangerous time to be in a boat on the water. The disciples are in a boat with Jesus four times in this gospel. Remember: the church adopted a boat with a cross for its mast as one of its earliest symbols. So, this story is about what happened to Jesus and his followers one night long ago, but it also may be a story about what happens to the church.

Out there, in the dark, a storm blew up. And this wasn’t just a little storm-Scripture says: “the waves beat INTO the boat, so that the boat was.....swamped.” This is not good. This is a death-dealing danger. But Jesus is asleep. His followers are scrambling, terrified, but he sleeps on.

They finally yell at him. “DON’T YOU CARE THAT WE ARE GOING TO DROWN????? Jesus wakes up, tells wind and waves to hush up, and they do. After his words to the storm, he turns and addresses the disciples: “Why are you afraid?”

We think Jesus' friends should be reassured. But they are not. Mark's gospel tells us they turn to each other saying, "WHO is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him." The text also tells us "they were filled with a great fear." WHO IS THIS? That's the question we raise every time we step into a boat with Jesus.

Rev. Willimon reflects on this:

Preachers will tell you..the thing we fear... is not being heard by you. We...struggle to proclaim the gospel... And there you sit, zombie-like stares, utterly unmoved. That's what we fear. But I'll tell you God's truth. If there's one thing scarier than not being heard in a sermon it's being heard.

I preach a nice, middle-of-the-road, Methodist... sermon, we sing a hymn, march out, you greet me at the door saying, "That was a great sermon!! I get the gospel!! I'm going to sell the pickup, quit my job, learn Spanish, and move to...Ecuador as a missionary!"

And I say to you, "I was just preaching! We're Methodists! We're not supposed to take this stuff literally!"

Lord, Lord. Jesus is in the boat with us and he is one Scary Skipper.

Jesus died, but then he rose. Even DEATH is subject to him. This Jesus we claim as Savior is able to subdue powers over which we have no control--- and HE DEMANDS THAT WE SAIL ON WITH HIM. Nothing is over until he says its over. He makes a way when there is no way. And this scares the pants off us.

Life is full of storms, all kinds of storms. They terrify us. But Jesus expects that our FAITH which equals TRUST will carry us INTO STORMS WITH HIM. He expects us to honor him as our commander, our skipper, and GO WHEREVER HE LEADS US. We'd prefer a Savior who is a "Storm Eraser" or a "Storm Avoider", but friends, that ain't what we got!

Willimon writes about a declining inner city church. The Bishop appointed a young pastor, telling her the church was about to close—"Lost their neighborhood", he said.

But she found there actually WAS a neighborhood. Almost none of the church members lived nearby, but there was a world of need around the building. At the pastor's urging, the church opened its doors to the neighborhood. Some members ran a soup kitchen A health care cooperative held a health clinic in unused Sunday school rooms. Now on Sundays that once declining, mostly empty church is nearly half full of people.

Willimon was inspired by this story, but surprised by the pastor's addendum to the story of the church's resurrection. "Some of our best, long-time members just couldn't take it. They were... prepared for our last days as a church, and then, wonder of wonders, the church was raised, given a new mission, a reason for living. And it scared them to death."

We have a mission: to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Our specific church, in the mission statement of Baker Memorial UMC adopted last April, has declared that in all we do we are to be **LOVING GOD, SERVING OTHERS, and GROWING TOGETHER**. That's our mission.

And our vision is to be:

**A hub of Christ-directed Activity
Radiating out to the world
From the heart of St Charles.**

We DO the MISSION to REACH the VISION.

Our mission is not to just get together regularly and have a nice time. Jesus calls us to get into the boat with him! To sail on seas that will not always be calm! To always be Loving God, Serving others and Growing together. As we do this mission we will reach God's vision to be a hub of Christ-directed activity radiating out to the world from the heart of St. Charles!! We are called to TRUST and follow the Lord of winds, waves and death. Do we have the guts to stay in the boat with Jesus?????

If we do, if we do--- I think we may well see a great harvest in the year 2020. At least 356 people here to worship God each weekend- and great things being done for the redemption of the world! Amen. Amen.