

## Sermon for the Third Sunday After The Epiphany: Mark 1:14-20

The Rev. Brooks Cato

So, I was listening to a new-to-me band the other day, and it made me long for the days of concerts and musical performances and standing way-too-close to a bunch of strangers crammed into a space designed for four tops and busboys. And that got me to thinking about the first concerts I ever went to. There were a bunch in short order, and they covered all sorts of genres. My very first concert, and you can add this to your file of Random Rector Trivia, was Joan Baez. It was a sitdown affair in a college auditorium -- and I couldn't have been more than 10 -- but Lord did it ignite something in my little soul. The next was some local-ish Zydeco band in town for our annual crawdad festival. And the next was the Christian rock band Jars of Clay.

Now, I'd never really listened to Jars of Clay all that much. But I knew they existed, so when I found out I could go to their concert, my heart fluttered at the prospect of being so close to name-recognizable fame. So, when the day came, I piled up in a church van with my Baptist friends, made the drive to wherever (Oklahoma, maybe?), and watched as the biggest production I'd ever seen exploded before my eyes. Lights! Laser displays! Amps turned up to 11! On the whole, the show itself was fun. I didn't know any of the songs well enough to sing along like the rest of my concert going cohort, but I still enjoyed it. I didn't raise my arms in the air out of prayer, but I did put my hands in the air like I just didn't care like MTV and Biggie Smalls had instructed. After the show, we piled back into the van and drove to some local basketball court where we unfurled our sleeping bags and set up for the night, boys under one basket, girls under the other. The youth leader/weekend van driver called us all to center court, and there he had some words for us.

Apparently, he was disappointed in our behavior at the show. Sure, there were some hands in the air that really did care, but there weren't enough of us moved by the spirit. There weren't enough closed eyes and there certainly was a little too much side-to-side hip swaying. At one point between songs, the lead singer led a prayer, and our hyped up group wasn't connected enough with that prayer, the youth leader scolded. Now, nevermind the whole how-could-he-possibly-know-how-connected-we-were thing. And nevermind the idea that just because you're in a place where other people are prayerful means you have to be prayerful there, too. Nevermind those things. What got me was the next thing he said. The van-driving youth leader made another claim that rang my still-ringing ears and grated on what was left of my youthful hearing. He said, "I just don't know how you're going to be successful in this world if you aren't willing to lay down your nets and really follow Jesus." I will admit, as a kid surrounded by other kids that I liked and a few that I wanted to think I was as cool as they were, I felt guilty. Like, no I didn't feel particularly prayerful that night, I was having fun. But at least then, I wanted to go back a few hours in time and nod at the right moment or wiggle a little less or put my hands up like the youth director, and not Biggie, said. I wanted the rest of the group to be able to look at me and say I was cool because I'd done it right. Instead, I just hung my head like the rest of them, berated for apparently attending a concert wrong. But the youth director didn't stop there. He kept on going about the kinds of success we could expect in the world if we were to lay down our nets and follow Jesus and go to concerts the right way. He pointed to his fancy golf shirt and his surprisingly nice, leather shoes and said we could wear clothes like that. He talked about the fame Jars of Clay had attained and said we could pray our way to the stage. He even said we could get to a place where we would want for nothing in this world because our faith would provide.

Even as a kid, I knew something was up there. See, my family were some of the most faithful people I knew. My mom read the Bible every morning before the rest of the house had woken up. My uncle memorized long scripture passages when his insomnia got the best of him. My grandmother couldn't even make a biscuit without singing gospel songs! And yet, life wasn't easy for them. Money was tight. Work was hard. They weren't hated in the world, but they also weren't sitting on thrones or wielding any sort of power outside of the

power they had at the front of their classrooms. Those folks were among the most Christ-focused I'd ever laid eyes on, and yet, those things the youth director was talking about weren't in their lives. Did that mean that they weren't actually as faithful as I thought they were? Did that mean that, somehow, my mom, uncle, grandma, my whole family, really, did that mean that they were just pretending to be committed to Christ like I felt I should've pretended at that concert? Or did it mean that the youth director was getting something wrong? You can imagine the tension I felt sitting in the middle of that basketball court with the forces of family, religion, peer acceptance, and experience all pulling on me at once. All those forces couldn't be right at the same time, so what was going on?

Well, it turns out, what that youth director was preaching is something called the "prosperity gospel," which we've talked about a little bit. It's the idea that, if you just follow God well enough, you will be rewarded on this earth and in this life. If you've ever heard of Oral Roberts or Joel Osteen, those fellas are sort of the exemplars of this theology. It is not, by any means, a new idea. In fact, a few books in the Hebrew Scriptures take the idea head-on. The entire book of Job, for example, is an argument against. Ecclesiastes also disagrees. And today, while the reading from Jonah leaves out all the fun bits, we get a glimpse at this contradiction here, too. Jonah is supposed to tell the people of Nineveh that they're living wrong, and they should repent or be punished. When they actually repent, Jonah gets mad! He wants them to get what they deserve (that's the consequence side of the prosperity gospel), but God grants them what they don't deserve: grace. Psalm 62 also pushes back. Those of high degree and those of low estate, on the scales they're both lighter than a breath. Their position doesn't mean a thing. It doesn't prove anything. If wealth increases, don't get too comfortable. Paul, too, says all those things that define you don't really mean anything "for the present form of this world is passing away."

I don't want to give the impression that the prosperity gospel is completely made up. There are a number of places in scripture that can be interpreted to support it. For example, that last verse of Psalm 62 could go that way: "for you repay everyone according to his deeds." Maybe that means the good get a fat paycheck and the bad don't. Maybe. But our experience of the world today, and that of many authors of scripture way back when, describe a world that isn't quite so tidy. We see folks like my family struggling. We see folks that don't care one ounce about God thriving. The author of Ecclesiastes calls this injustice "an evil under the sun." It's part of our world, and it has been for a mighty long time. Should it be this way? Life would be a whole lot neater if it wasn't. And maybe we're called to help change it. But whether it should be this way or not, it's the reality of our world now.

And the fact is, when Jesus strolls into Galilee and spies Simon and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee, when he calls them to lay down their nets and follow him, he does not call them to an easy life. They leave behind their work, their families, their homes. And take up, instead, the way of vagabonds. Their faith is obvious in their dedication to Christ, but one look at them wouldn't show much in the way of success. Their feet are dirty and cracked. Their faces sun- and wind-burnt. They're thin and they're weary and I suspect they smelled to high heaven. If you're trying to judge the depth of someone's faith based on how successful they are in this world, these four and the Christ they follow would be among the least faithful, and Pilate and Herod and Tiberius among the most. And if their appearance in life wasn't enough, the manner of death for those dirty desert wanderers was no cause for great celebration. All of them were killed, all of them, for preaching what they learned from the man who asked them to lay down their nets and follow him. That is no measure of success. In fact, that looks a whole lot like failure. So much so, that some early theologians call Christ's own death on the Cross "the greatest scandal of Christianity."

This past week, some of us rejoiced as the levers of power shifted. Some of us mourned that change. At the risk of being a buzzkill, I want to remind us all, that while this change in government will affect our lives, it

is not the end of our work. We each, at some point, dropped our own nets to follow Christ, regardless of what some man on a distant earthly throne was up to. And now, there's another man on that distant earthly throne. But he's not Jesus. No, we've still got work to do. We've still got nets to lay down and crosses to take up. We'll still have days where our successes baffle the measures of this world. We'll still point to a place of truth, a place we pray is God's truth, and we'll do it regardless of who's in power. The other day, I reminded our Bible study group that our role is not some imagined middle ground between parties; our role, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, is to "Learn to do right, seek justice, and defend the oppressed." If that means we wear out the soles of our shoes and blister our faces with cold wind to spread the shocking Good News that frees this world from superficial measures of success, then so be it. If it means leaving security behind to show the world love, then so be it. And if it means we do these things even unto a shameful death, then so be it. But in all things, our hope is in the Lord.

If I could go back to that moment on the basketball court with post-concert adrenaline still pumping, I don't know what I'd say. Those outward markers that that youth minister talked about just aren't compelling for me. I don't see that prosperity stuff as the overwhelming lesson to learn from scripture. But, I know that somehow, all those trappings are important for that youth director. Maybe he's wrong, I don't know. But if it helps him to live more faithfully, I suppose that's a step in the right direction. But, for the rest of us, we've got to hold that idea loosely. It's appealing to think that God has put a stamp of approval on your bank account if your bank account is a sight to behold. But what does that manner of thinking allow you to get away with? And if your bank account isn't so substantial, what judgement must you feel is passed on you? That's why I just can't go there. It doesn't line up with our experience of the world, and it holds about as much theological water as those nets the disciples laid down. Instead of the measures of this world, regardless of fancy clothes or investment opportunities or political success, remember where we started. We started with humble workers laying down their lives and taking up Christ's. May we be so faithful.