

## **Putting Persons First** Scriptures: Luke 13:10-17; Mark 5:1-17

### The World's Priorities:

Suppose a doctor discovered a cure for cancer. That would be good news. Having been discovered the cure is there, but unless doctors are taught how to handle the cure, it will not become available to all cancer sufferers.

Here on earth, at a place which can be located and a date which can be fixed, Jesus gave the human race its only cure to the deadly disease of sin. "It is accomplished!" he cried from his cross<sup>(John 19:30, NEB)</sup>. The cure - the good news - cannot be made available to sinners all over the world unless Christians learn about it and go out to administer it. That is the Church's role. "We have this ministry,"<sup>(2 Corinthians 4:1)</sup> Paul wrote. Paul means Christ's ministry which he accomplished in the days of his flesh and which he committed to all who profess his name. Our role is to study the gospel ministry of Jesus, to learn about it and make it universally available.

The event in Mark. Early one morning Jesus restored sanity to an insane who had been cast out of normal society and forced to find his asylum among the tombs of the dead. The man believed that he was possessed by a thousand demons; so Jesus, in order to cure him, had to show him that the demons had left his body and found another dwelling place. He sent them, or sent something, into a nearby herd of pigs. The stampeded and rushed headlong over a steep cliff into the Sea of Galilee and drowned. The local farmers weren't very happy about all that floating pork. They didn't begrudge the healing miracle - they were not inhuman - but they couldn't see why it had to happen at the expense of their livestock. The Gospel says that "they began to beg Jesus to depart from their neighborhood"<sup>(Mark 5:17)</sup>. You can see the contrast in values. The farmers put pigs first, people second. Jesus put people first, pigs second. People were his priority.

But the Church today lives in a society which is terribly mixed up in its priorities. Here are some examples. Just this past week the news aired a story with pictures about starvation and children dying due to starvation. I searched the internet and found lots of pictures and stories about the need for food. They have some food but not enough food with the right nutritional strength. We also see commercials and online advertisements for high-cost especially nutritious dog foods. After looking at the hunger situation for children we now see dog food of red meaty chunks covered with thick gravy. Believe it or not, many dogs are eating better than millions of people.

Another glaring example of mixed up priorities can be seen in the point of view that puts the space race ahead of the human race. In one year, 2018, countries spend over 70 Billion for space programs.  
<sup>(<https://spaceq.ca/euroconsult-releases-its-government-space-programs-report-expenditures-reach-us70-9-in-2018/>)</sup> This week it was announced that the preparations for another trip to the moon is in the works. That is expected to cost over 30 billion. Then it hopes to head for Mars. Now consider what countries have contributed for Global Food Security. Wow - over 75 Billion - but wait that is not for one year - that is for five years from 2014 to 2018 inclusive.  
<sup>(<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-47r>)</sup> Global Hunger spots around the world come for a variety of reasons such as conflict, climate, disease, displacement, economic crisis, locusts, and political instability.  
<sup>(<https://www.gzeromedia.com/the-graphic-truth-global-hunger-hotspots-in-2021>)</sup> On top of that 1/4 to 1/3 of all food produced is lost or wasted.  
<sup>(<https://www.ibtimes.com/world-bank-takes-food-waste-seriously-estimating-third-production-wasted-1559247>)</sup> There are groups like Okanagan Gleaners  
<sup>(<https://www.okanagangleaners.com/>)</sup> who gather raw vegetables and transform them into a dry food mix. I am not against things like the space shots, but there has been a miscalculation in priorities. Governments can respond to major issues when they choose to work together to address world issues. Take the Covid Crisis. Look at the world-wide response. The United States alone over 6 Trillion, yes Trillion not Billion.  
<sup>(Washington Post, April 15, 2020)</sup> Now put covid and hunger into perspective. According to a Heart Breaking Truth post, Feb. 19, 2020 Coronavirus: about 1000 dead worldwide in 2 months, worldwide panic, daily messages in the media. World hunger: Around 24,000 deaths in a day, 3 in 4 deaths are children under 5 years. Hunger is not something the rich can die from, so it doesn't interest anyone. If Governments can spend the kind of money they do in space, if they can work together to tackle Corona Virus, then why can't they work together to keep men, women and children alive here on earth?

But why pick on the space program and Corona Virus? Are not the expenditures of projected expenditures on sports stadiums and the fabulous salaries paid to professional athletes and entertainers of concern as long as so many of the earth's population go to bed hungry every night? Look at the worth of some of those at the top of the Forbes wealth list. And on the news, LeBron James has signed a contract extension with the Lakers, a two-year contract \$97.1 million. Compare this to the one of the top Womans NBA players. Now what about the US President and our Prime Minister. What about the top 10 billionaires of Forbes List. What can they do with what they make? Sadio Mane, the Liverpool star earning around 10.2 million a year, gave the world a lesson in modesty after fans spotted him carrying a cracked iPhone. In an interview with TeleDakar in October 2019, Mane had outlined that his major goal after becoming one of the top players was to help people. "Why would I want ten Ferraris, 20 diamond watches and two jet planes? What would that do for the world? I starved, I worked in the fields, I played barefoot, and I didn't go to school. Now I can help people. I prefer to build schools and give poor people food or clothing. I have built schools [and] a stadium; we provide clothes, shoes, and food for people in extreme poverty. In addition, I give 70 euros per month to all people from a very poor Senegalese region in order to contribute to their family economy. I do not need to display luxury cars, luxury homes, trips, and even planes. I prefer that my people receive a little of what life has given me," Mane said.

Our society is all mixed up in its priorities and it is the Church's business to straighten them out - unless the Church also happens to be mixed up; in which case the Church needs to take a closer look at the priorities of Jesus.

The Priorities of Jesus: Every person has their own priorities. You can usually tell what they are by asking three questions:

1. What do you have time for? 2. How do you spend your wealth? 3. What do you allow to interrupt you?

When we ask those questions about Jesus, the Gospels give an immediate answer. What did he have time for? Persons. He led the busiest of lives, he moved with a sense of urgency because he knew that his time was rapidly running out; yet he always found time for persons, time to chat with a man at mid-night (Nicodemus) or a woman at the well, time to visit the home of friends or to take little children upon his knee.

Now did he spend his wealth, which was not money but the power of God? On Persons. If you read the Gospels carefully you will see that, whenever they describe Jesus as being conscious of Divine power, they immediately tell how he used that power for some act of service for people. The most dramatic example is his washing of the disciples' feet.<sup>(John 13:3-5)</sup>

What did Jesus allow to interrupt him? Persons. It didn't matter what he was doing - preaching a sermon, eating a meal, taking his rest, praying - he could always be interrupted by persons who needed him. Persons were his priority. He put persons first.

We have already seen that Jesus put persons before things. "You care for men; we care for swine," declared the irate farmers after Jesus healed the demoniac. They were right. Jesus did care for people. That was the motive behind his frontal attack on the laws governing Sabbath observance.

He didn't want to undermine those laws but he did want to expose their distortion of people's priorities and he wanted to straighten them out. Out for a walk through a grain field with the disciples, they started to pick some grain. The Pharisees told them that was not lawful. Jesus responded, "The Sabbath was made for the human, not the human for the Sabbath."<sup>(Mark 2:27)</sup>

In today's Luke passage, they objected to his healing on the Sabbath of a woman bent over for 18 years, he called them hypocrites and accused them of being kinder to their donkeys and sheep and oxen than they were to people<sup>(Luke 13:15)</sup>. In Matthew, a man came to Jesus with a withered hand, the leaders asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Again he said, "what man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and life it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!"<sup>(Matthew 12:11-12)</sup>

Jesus put persons before institutions. Here again his priorities contrasted sharply with those of his contemporaries. One day, as he stood with his disciples in the temple at Jerusalem, they said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"<sup>(Mark 13:1)</sup> It was the normal reaction of country boys to the big buildings of the great city. But Jesus had also said "Look!" but he was not pointing to the temple. He was pointing to a poor widow who had dropped two copper coins, her total wealth, into the temple treasury<sup>(Mark 12:41-44)</sup>. In his eyes that was the big thing, the really wonderful thing, the mightiest financial transaction in the world. It was precisely because the temple buildings represented an institution that it did not notice persons like the poor widow, for they exploited such persons rather than serving them. So Jesus predicted their destruction. "There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down"<sup>(13:2)</sup>. I say now that not one scrap of that building will remain standing if it ever exploits people rather than serve them.

Jesus put person before people as he was always stopping to help, always turning his attention from the many to the one. He said that the whole world could not be set in the balance over against one human soul<sup>(Mark 8:36)</sup>. He said that all heaven's energies are sometimes directed to the salvation of one lost soul<sup>(Luke 15:1-10)</sup>. In Capernaum one day he was preaching to a large congregation when a distraught father interrupted the sermon and begged him to come and heal his sick daughter, Jesus, valuing persons more highly than congregations, stopped preaching and "went with him"<sup>(Mark 5:24)</sup>. In Jericho, where the people lined the streets to get a sight of him, Jesus heard the cries of a blind beggar above the shouts of the crowd and for the sake of that one lowly individual he stopped and said, "call him"<sup>(Mark 10:49)</sup>.

In Bethany, where his disciples criticized a woman for an extravagant gesture toward him, saying that the money should have been given to the poor, Jesus rebuked them, not because he didn't care for the poor but because he cared for that particular poor person whose extravagance met her own deepest need<sup>(Matthew 26:6-13)</sup>. What she had done would be spoken in memory of her. Jesus put persons even before the success of his own mission. That's what took him to the cross. He was safe as long as he simply preached sermons and taught disciples and proclaimed broad, general, principles about God and man and love and the Kingdom.

Nobody quarrels with preachers and social radicals; they come and they go. It was when Jesus got down to specific cases that his enemies started to worry and began plotting to do away with him. They did not object to his gospel of God's forgiveness; they objected vehemently when he cured a paralysed man by saying, "my son, your sins are forgiven"<sup>(Mark 2:5-7)</sup>. They were not disturbed by his teaching about life after death; they were dreadfully disturbed when he demonstrated his power by raising Lazarus from the dead.<sup>(John 11:38-44)</sup> Jesus jeopardized his mission for the sake of persons. His care for them took him to Calvary, and even there he cared for them to the very end.

- What of the Church's ministry when it is consciously patterned on the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel? Priorities become clear. First and foremost it must be a ministry to persons - not populations, social structures or new buildings. Persons must have first claim upon us, and all else must be subordinate to them.

God sent Jesus into the world to seek and to save persons. Jesus sent the Church into the world to seek and to save persons. They are the Church's priority. For many lifetimes the Church has been engaged in this mission, and with each generation it has become bigger, costlier and more elaborate - as you can see by a visit to the Vatican in Rome, the World Council of Churches in Geneva. There are many impressive downtown churches. But there is a question that needs to be asked about this big costly, elaborate rescue operation which had reached across so many centuries, the question that an American lady had the colossal cheek to ask one of the guides in Westminster Abbey: "Young man, stop your chattering and tell me. Has anyone been saved here lately?" The Church, that is us, needs to continue to concentrate on ministry to people. That was why our churches Bargain Bin was our spirit sighting this morning. Janet told us of number of stories about sharing and recycling, about helping, and even staff reaching out to help people evacuated from fire zones and other stories. The Bargain Bin is an example that people are the priority. Our Church must have people as our priority, so that we can have the same the priorities of Jesus. People then might respond to the Church as they once responded to Jesus.