



October 5, 2020

Dear St. Mark's Community,

At the dawn of his writing career, Mark Twain wrote a short story entitled "Petrified Man." He described the discovery of a mummy in the mountains south of Gravelly Ford who came to his death from protracted exposure about a century earlier. He was perfectly preserved in a sitting position. The people of the neighborhood volunteered to bury the man. But when they attempted to remove him, they discovered that the water which had dripped upon him for ages from the crag above had coursed down his back and deposited a limestone sediment under him which had glued him to the bedrock upon which he sat. The local judge refused to allow the citizens to blast the petrified man from his position so they could give him a proper burial. Such a course would be little less than sacrilege, the judge decreed.

If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, says Paul to the church at Philippi, that is, if circumcision and keeping the law can save you, then I have every reason to be confident of my salvation. But I had all that and I gave it up. Why? Not because it wasn't worth anything. It was worth plenty, believe me! No, I gave it up because knowing Jesus was worth more.

Those laws were given to the Israelites to be boundaries of their new life to help them live in relationship to each other and God as a community. This is true also for both Jesus and Paul's teachings. Paul has every reason to believe that he has accomplished righteousness. Every aspect of his earlier religious life as a faithful Jew and Pharisee has been "right" – his rituals, his lineage, his practices, even his hatred of those who disagree with him. However, Christ has come to him and Christ has transformed his knowledge of all those righteous things.

It seems that after he had preached the gospel to the people of Philippi, and after they had been baptized, some folks came through

## The Lord is up to something

During this pandemic and our nation divided and in upheaval, at St. Mark's we have continued to lend our hands to God as we ask the question "what is God calling us to do?" and finding new ways to respond to that question. We continue to care for one another as well as those in the community. The Lord is up to something; the Spirit will not be stopped.

town insisting that if the converts wanted to be sure of their salvation they needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses. They, like the judge in Twain's story, could not let the petrified man – a metaphor for a restrictive understanding of God – be buried. But Paul believed that God has a mission and has created the church to come alongside what God is already doing.

Maybe this is a good time to remember that the one long before Paul who is bold and unhindered is God – who just won't stop, who won't stay still, who loves to surprise, who loves to turn everything upside down. That's what Jesus does with his teaching through the parables like the one today of the Wicked Tenants. The religious authorities who were challenging Jesus at the time, the tenants in this parable, held a number of assumptions about how God would establish God's kingdom on earth including what the Messiah would look like and do. They were Twain's petrified man.

But Jesus's messiahship teaches us that real power comes from responding to the prophets' bidding that ultimately what matters in this life for us is to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” And to understand and start living this reality we must let go of our pre-conceived notions of the way God should act and turn in faith and let God do what God will do by grace and use us as a means of that grace. That happens when we filter our lives through the presence of Christ and the power of the Gospel. The mission of God will not be stopped by some restrictive understanding of God. God is bigger than that. And the Lord wants us to come alongside this work even when doing so will upset our apple cart. At least, certainly, it changes us. A recently glimpsed bumper sticker says, “The world you desire comes not by chance but by change.” The kingdom Jesus taught comes only when we bury the petrified man that has allowed us to see others as less than human, create and maintain conditions that keep people in poverty, and refuse to avoid change out of fear.

During this pandemic and our nation divided and in upheaval, at St. Mark's we have continued to lend our hands to God as we ask the question “what is God calling us to do?” and finding new ways to respond to that question. We continue to care for one another as well as those in the community. The Lord is up to something; the Spirit will not be stopped. Knowing Christ means we understand that we are immensely loved and blessed and we can't fully appreciate those blessings without sharing them with others – giving away the kingdom.

Today, we are asked to make an offering to God; to join in making a commitment to being a part of what God is doing through us. God does incredible things through hearts and hands that are lived open and willing to be generous and trust what God is doing. So we begin the pledge commitment of Stewardship as one of our ways of showing thanks to our great and merciful God. We spend the gifts we receive carefully, effectively, and fully to give strength to our ministries and to make our ministries give honor to God. I continue to be grateful for the generosity you offer at St. Mark's. For one hundred and fifty-four years we have continuously sought to respond to God's call to us as his hands and feet and voice in this community and beyond. And we profess a trust in God who made each of us in God's image, loves us more than we can ever imagine, and won't let us go even in weak moments when we, like the Israelites, turn away from God.

I'm asking each of us to look into our hearts and trust in God's care for us. We make our pledge in

good faith. I ask that you be in prayerful conversation with God and respond generously in supporting God's mission through this church with your pledge. Being a follower of Jesus is a matter of living as good stewards – giving joyfully from the bounty of our lives to honor the God who has given us so much.

It bears repeating: God just keeps giving us this gracious invitation to come alongside him, and be filled with this most curious and unpredictable Spirit, and to be part of this challenging and rewarding work – to lend a hand and share what God has already given to us. The Lord is full of surprises and challenges and gives us exactly what we need to rise to the occasion: trust, courage, strength, willingness, the grace to hold on and the grace to let go. The Lord will not fail us.

I am grateful to all who work so hard to make St. Mark's a "sign of the Kingdom" – those involved directly in ministries, those who contribute to the financial well-being of this church, and the many who support us and consider St. Mark's to be their faith home. We have been given so much – an abundance – and we choose to use our resources to the glory of God.

Blessings,

*David*

love is our tradition