

Good News! Jesus is Alive and Kicking from Capernaum to DeKalb (and his followers too!)

Last week in your bulletin there was a slip of paper for sermon feedback with two questions: 1. Where are the places I live? 2. How am I following Jesus in those places? In other words, how are my actions speaking louder than my words? What did you come up with?

I want to share with you an experience I had of following Jesus this week. I use my computer daily for communication, but I don't always think about this communication as a place where I live or am following Christ. God surprised me this week through my email account. First, it started with my account being spammed. Someone hacked my account and sent an email about pharmaceuticals for sale through Canada or some such ridiculous thing to EVERYONE in my address book. I've had this account since 2003, so that's a lot of people. And I had lots of "helpful" emails and phone calls to let me know, "Stacy, your account has been hacked." Yes, thank you everyone, I KNOW!! I was very annoyed with the whole thing to say the least. A few days after I changed my password and put all of this to bed, I received an email from someone I haven't heard from in five years.

Mildred was one of my dearest friends in seminary. Mildred is from Zimbabwe. After seminary, this tenaciously faithful contemporary of my parents went back into the chaotic world that is Zimbabwe in the twenty-first century to train young men for the priesthood. The last I had heard from her was shortly after graduation when they had temporarily had to close down the theological school she was teaching at because of a lack of food to feed the students. The whole country was experiencing a food crisis at the time. Since then I have heard nothing. The Church in Zimbabwe has been living through a new persecution that

began over a year ago. You may remember me telling a story about a year ago about Father Mike Greene (who was the priest at St. Luke's, Dixon) who was on a mission trip there last year and his experience of being kicked out of a church by the police with the whole congregation. Mugabe's government has seized all the property of the Anglican Church and set up a parallel government appointed Anglican Church. The true Anglican priests and lay people have been arrested, beaten, and killed.

And here I was sitting in my office half a world away reading an email from my friend, thanking me for my spam message. She asked after my family, recalled an adventure we had taken to Sea World together, and thanked me for my prayers as she and her people are living through very frightening times. And as I stared at that screen my eyes filled with tears because there he was: Jesus Christ my Lord. There He was, working in mysterious ways, as always, reminding me of my larger call as a follower of Christ. I'm called to pray for and actively support my sisters and brothers in God's family. I'm called to give thanks for a spammer who helped Mildred reconnect with me and know that she is not alone—her sister in Christ is praying for her and loves her enough to send an albeit strange email about pharmaceuticals for sale through the internet! I'm called to remind us that Christ is calling us to follow him in all sorts of places we may not have imagined. The call is to walk with him, and put the world back together with him, one piece at a time.

In our account from the Gospel of Mark today we follow Jesus and his first disciples to the synagogue in Capernaum where they meet a man possessed by a demon. The demon cries out, "I know who you are! You are the Holy one of God!" Jesus replies, "Be quiet!" And then he effectively silences the demon, casts it out, and heals this troubled man. Although Jesus wants to keep his true identity under wraps, it's too late. The word is out! The word on the street is there is a new teaching in Capernaum today. Jesus is one who teaches with

authority. God is in the o bringing spiritual healing and reconciliation to all who call out his name. Soon a great word of mouth advertising campaign begins. And you know the rest of the story.

But what if everyone gathered for prayer that day at the synagogue in Capernaum who had witnessed this powerful act of exorcism and healing had simply shrugged their shoulders and said, "Wow. That was weird," and moved on with their day. Certainly God would have made a way in another time and place, of that we can be sure. But those in Capernaum would have missed out on sharing the good news of God up to something new in the world. Good news is bubbling up from the well-spring of life all over the place, and certainly here at St. Paul's. Can you hear it? Do you feel it? Is your soul refreshed? I know mine is!

What am I talking about? Well, for one thing this choir is experiencing a revival! We are on the cusp of something new. Kids are singing with the grown-ups. Children are singing "Halle, Halle, Halle-lu-jah!" in the sanctuary, in the hallways, in the car, at the kitchen table, in the grocery store, and at the swimming pool. The grown-up singers are filling up more and more space in the pews. They have been adding singers as they arrive at our doors showing us the heart of hospitality of Christ himself. And they sound good too!

Our Sunday School is vibrant, bright, joyful, and lively! Children are bringing home the stories of our faith into their daily lives. Families are talking about God and praying together on days besides Sunday. Our childcare staff reports that many Sundays are extremely active in our new nursery space—hectic even. We may need to open a second nursery space if current trends continue. This is good news!

At this time last year I proposed planting a neighborhood garden at St. Paul's. We did that last year with donations of labor and materials from members, and we learned a lot, including the wild growth habits of pumpkins. All winter the garden has been growing and expanding in our minds and hearts. There are murmurs of a bigger garden this year, with more food to go to the food pantry and a patch just for pumpkins and sunflowers—for the pure delight and joy of their beauty and vigor. A rogation days revival is on the horizon. Rogation days are the days when we go out of doors and ask for God's blessing on the fields and ask for an abundant harvest. I'm willing to take the rogation days prayers on the road and come bless your home gardens as well. All you have to do is ask!

Last week I was reminded again, I've lost track how many times people have mentioned this to me, that we are running out of coffee and refreshments at our fellowship time after the 10:30AM service. This is good news, we have more people here than we thought we did, so let's buy more food and let God's abundance flow!

Besides planting, singing, and eating together we are reading the Bible together more and more. We are gathering together faithfully to ask questions about our faith and share our stories as we reflect on our Biblical stories. This study and reflection is causing us to be ready to act when Jesus calls us to follow him into new territory. We have a growing list of volunteers who serve at the Salvation Army Food pantry helping clients shop for their groceries from the pantry shelves. I hear the stories of the volunteers being shared in our gatherings at St. Paul's: stories of compassion and gratitude.

This past September we began a friendship with the Islamic Society at Northern Illinois University when they asked for our help in finding a place to worship when they suddenly outgrew their current location. Prior to ISNIU contacting us, we

didn't even know they were our neighbors right here on Normal Road. Their mosque, located in a little white house down the street, doesn't have a sign. Many of us were surprised by the Spirit of God that was very present in our conversations with ISNIU, and I think they were as well. All the time we have spent reflecting on our call to hospitality as followers of Christ was put to the test, and we said, come on in. As it turned out, ISNIU grew too large for even our parish hall, but we have remained friends. In two weeks we will be hosting ISNIU in our parish hall for a neighborhood dinner they are hosting for the people of our neighborhood to discuss the building of a new community center at their current location. The potential for further interfaith dialogue and friendship with ISNIU is high. Equally high is the potential for us to grow deeper roots in our own Christian faith as we practice the radical hospitality of Christ with our Muslim neighbors.

Our eyes are being opened. Like St. Paul experienced after the blinding revelation of Christ on the road to Damascus—the scales have fallen away. Like Paul we are starting a new phase of our journey on the same old roads. You. Yes, you. All of you, you have done this. You have seen Jesus and followed him. You have discerned the movement of the Holy Spirit and allowed your hearts to be transformed. It's time to start that whisper campaign ala Capernaum. Time to get the word out about your church and invite others to come along for the journey. Time to follow up with your friends at St. Paul's who haven't been here in a while. I do this, but they want to hear from you too!

Time to get together and figure out who we say that we are. Time to figure out how to live into who we say we are. Time to say and be the church where everyone can hear and be heard; the church where you can make the God-connection without exception. Time to advertise with this vision in mind—on our lips and in our hearts. Time to get creative about how to spread the word. It's time! Get it? The kingdom of God is near, at the very door. Jesus is bringing

Epiphany 4 and Annual Meeting, January 29, 2012

Mark 1:21-28

The Rev. Stacy A. Walker-Frontjes, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, DeKalb, Illinois

spiritual healing to every man, woman and child. The reconciliation of Creation to the Creator has come. It's time to open our eyes and our hearts to know this truth. So, what are you waiting for? Don't' keep St. Paul's a secret! Jesus is alive and kicking here. Go and tell your friends and strangers too. Come and see. Come and be a part of what God is up to in this corner of the world.