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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
21 January 2024

Sermon on Mark 1:14-20

Worship Theme:

COMMITTED TO A LOFTY CHARGE

Jesus is our only Savior. But Jesus is so good to us that he actually shares some of his work salvation with us. In order to give our lives profound meaning and eternal purpose, Jesus asks all believers to serve as his ambassadors, sharing the gospel with whomever he brings into our sphere of influence. This is the life-changing revelation for this week: Jesus has committed us to a lofty charge – the privilege of playing a role in his saving work. Thank you, Lord!

Sermon Theme: “Love to Tell the Story of Love”

Grace, and mercy, and peace – all these have been freely given to you by God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN!

I love telling stories. I enjoy the buildup and the details and everything that goes into creating suspense until finally we get to the point of the amazing climax of the tale! If we skip straight to the punchline and point of the story, we've missed so much! A good story is more than just a recollection of a fact or two, mundanely presented. I could tell you that my cereal bowl overflowed this morning and let that be the entire tale. Or I could tell you I poured too many rice chex into the bowl, added a banana and a handful of blueberries, poured the milk in, and by then there was so much in it that there was no way the bowl could contain it all. It's the same information (obviously in this case, none of it important!), but one has the build and arc of a story and the other does not.

This isn't just a fun little fact about me though. People love stories. Some of the biggest companies in the world have been built on story-telling. We love telling stories and we love hearing stories and we love being taken on a journey to another time and place. Even if we didn't personally experience it, through the person telling the story, we feel as if we were right there with them, watching it all unfold.

But we tell different kinds of stories, don't we. Certainly some stories we tell are light-hearted and fun and are just exciting moments of life that we want to share with others, and those are fantastic! But many stories we hear and tell aren't like that. Instead of stories that help someone, build them up, and paint them in a positive light, maybe we more often share stories that we know will probably hurt them, tear them down, and make everyone think they're terrible.

And if you're not sure about that, maybe it's proven by the fact that not a single one of us needs an explanation for the phrase “a juicy bit of gossip.” We all probably know exactly what we mean by that. We've all heard them and we've all shared them – the stories we know will do absolutely nothing to help another person. It could be detrimental to their well-being, lose them friends, and harm their reputation, perhaps forever. But who can resist some juicy gossip?! The story

of your co-worker just got busted for his 7th DUI, or your cousin who is going through a nasty divorce, or the girl you couldn't stand from high school who just lost her job and all her credibility because she got caught scamming everyone. It feels so good to share, because we see the dynamic of what happens when we do – the other person goes down, and by default, I go up. If people know what the other person has done, and they also know that I've never done such a horrible thing, then I come out looking better, and that's all that matters in the end.

There isn't really room for debate on this – we all know it happens because we all do it! And how sad that is. Our worship theme today reminds us that God has committed us to a lofty charge – we are called to live lives above reproach and to follow what God has said in his Word, and not just the parts we like or the parts we have an easy time obeying. No, God demands obedience to his entire Word.

But far too often, we disobey and we just don't care. We know God has called us to a new life, but sometimes it's much more fun to live the old life again! We know God has given us life-changing words, both to personally cherish and then to share with others, but how can we ignore the juicy gossip?! We tear into it like we tear into a juicy steak, shoveling it in, savoring each bite. And at the end we feel satisfied. And as long as we feel good, who cares if this is what God wants me to do or not?!

News flash – GOD DOES! God cares very much about the lives we live and the thoughts, words, and actions we fill our lives with. God gave commands about our lives to make sure we knew what his desire for us is! In the 10 Commandments and all throughout his Word, God shows us what he desires our lives to be like, and one of those commandments is even about story-telling! The 8th commandment reminds us to determine what will help our neighbor and what will hurt our neighbor and then choose to say and do what will help.

Because he's God, however, God also knew our stories would never be that way. We would never choose to say or do the right thing, never choose to follow God, never choose to do anything except what helps us and us alone, no matter what it might do to the people around us. That's the sinful nature we all have and those are the results it has in our lives every single time – even in something as seemingly simple and harmless as telling a story!

But God designed words to have an incredible impact, and God designed stories to be memorable. God made stories to be fun to tell and exciting to hear. We may not remember a long list of random facts, but we'll likely remember a story that took us along for an amazing adventure. So God entered our story. Certainly God was always part of the story of his creation – HE made it! And now he entered on a new level as a human being just like us. God entered our story, to change our story, and to give us a new story to tell.

(Mark 1) *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* That was a new story. Not new in the sense of "we've never heard of this before and it's completely coming out of left field!", but new in the sense of "the waiting is over." A Savior had been

promised for thousands of years and now, that Savior had arrived – “*The time has come!*” There’s a new story to tell!

So Jesus told it. Sometimes we call Jesus “the Master Story-Teller.” It probably wouldn’t take much thought to remember a parable or two that Jesus told. Many cultures in the world emphasize story-telling as a means of communication, and we would be hard-pressed to find a culture that doesn’t have any stories at all. But no other story has ever carried as much power and authority as the story our God has written and revealed to us: “*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*”

We love to tell stories, but as we said before, far too often and far too eagerly we tell stories which will clearly hurt and harm our neighbor. So Jesus presents a better story. *As Jesus walked along beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.* (Mk 1) The Bible is not just a collection of fun stories some people sat down and wrote; no, this is the holy Word of God Almighty and therefore everything in the Bible is completely true. Of course there are different types of literature in the Bible – letters, poetry, historical accounts, stories to illustrate or teach something, and so we read them appropriately – but if God has said it, it is true and without error.

So as we navigate through this beautiful written gift from God, we also get to consider why God decided this should be part of his story. Today we see Jesus calling out to sinful people saying two simple things: “*Come, follow me*” and “*I will send you out.*” He said those words to sinful fishermen a couple thousand years ago and he still says them to sinful people like you and me today. But why?

Why would Jesus ever come to people like us and ask us to follow him? Simply put, because he knows how much we need him. Every day of our lives is filled with stories of our failures and shortcomings, our acts of disobedience and disregard for others, the countless trials and hardships we face, and never-ending proof of the brokenness of sin both within us and surrounding us.

And in spite of all those stories and reasons NOT to come to us, he still does. Jesus still comes and calls us to follow him because he wants us to know that sin is not our final story. He gives us a new story of good news: the promised Savior has come, he successfully lived the perfect life God demands from humanity as the entrance fee to heaven, he willingly died to remove every stain and blemish from our record and our lives once and for all, and he victoriously rose from the dead proclaiming that sin and Satan and death are defeated forever. With this good news, Jesus replaces the devastating story of sin in our lives with a completely true story of mercy, forgiveness, and peace. A story of love. The story of a God who loves us so much that he does everything necessary to make sure we will live with him and be in his presence for all eternity. “*Come, follow me*” – nowhere else can we ever find such a beautiful story!

And it doesn’t even end there. Yes, Jesus calls us to follow him and stay connected to him for all the days of our life so that we live forever with him in paradise. But our lives also receive an additional purpose as we are sent out by

Jesus to share this story. He doesn't send us with stories to hurt or harm our neighbors, nor does he send us with stories of how great we are in comparison to others. Rather he sends us with the story of his perfect love: the love he so freely gave to us and the love he eagerly longs to continue giving to many more people all around the world. Billions of people on earth don't know Jesus yet. They don't know they have a God who loves them this much.

So Jesus sends us out to tell them. Pastors and teachers get to do that all the time and it's an incredible privilege to do this! But it's not just for pastors and teachers either; this is an amazing privilege we all have as God's people on earth – we get to tell the story of love over and over and over again, and it never gets boring or stale and the love we proclaim never runs out. Jesus commits us to this lofty charge – the mission of going out into the world around us and telling as many people as possible about Jesus. And the Apostle Paul reminded in 2 Cor. 5 today, it is the love of Christ which compels us to do this – the love which saves sinners. As people who are changed forever by Jesus, filled with his grace and mercy and peace, this story is our story, who we are and what we do. So dear brothers and sisters in the family God has chosen and saved, **love to tell this story of love**. It's the best story ever! Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.