

Nathan Brown
"Unintentionally Inhibiting Jesus"
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West Side Christian Church

Mark 2:1-12

A few years ago, our sister denomination, the United Church of Christ, aired a 30 second television ad as a part of their "God is Still Speaking" initiative. The commercial features two muscle-bound "bouncers" standing guard outside a symbolic, picturesque church, selecting which persons are permitted to attend Sunday services.

The bouncers are shown repeatedly saying "No!" to specific individuals as they try to enter the church. By the appearances of those rejected, it is insinuated that they are denied for reasons ranging from their sexual orientation, to their age, to the color of their skin or their ethnicity. Written text then interrupts the scene and reads, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." And a narrator proclaims, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

I think one aspect of our gospel reading this morning is captured by this commercial. That is the fact that every church has two bouncers standing out in front of it. No, they are not muscle bound men, literally turning people away. Those two bouncers are you and me, in our faithful attempts to see Jesus for ourselves.

As many times as I have read this passage from Mark, I never really paid attention to the crowds that surround Jesus' house. I never paid attention to where you and I would be, if we were in this story. I noticed Jesus and his healing power. I noticed the four men who are so committed to getting their friend healed, that they cut a hole in the roof and lower this paralytic into Jesus' presence. I certainly noticed the paralytic and his response to being healed.

However, in reading this passage again this week, this time I noticed the crowd. The paralytic's friends had to go to all the trouble with the roof because of the crowd. This huge group of people had clustered about Jesus. The text reads that it was so great a crowd that people couldn't even stand at the front door and hear what Jesus was saying. And these weren't just any people in the crowd. We learn later that the house was full of scribes, people who spent their day studying the scripture, pouring over the word of God, professional religious experts.

These scribes are those on the inside, not only on the inside of Jesus' house, but inside the faith. They are in the know. Mark doesn't say they are bad people; in fact, they are probably good people. They have heard enough of Jesus to want to come inside his house. They are patiently listening to Jesus' words, hoping to gain even more insight into the scriptures they were studying.

In other words, they are just like us. Just like you and me. You have come out and quite a good sized crowd of you too to sit at the feet of Jesus, to listen to Jesus. Not everyone in town got out of bed this morning and went to as much trouble to hear God's Word. You are insiders, the inner circle, and his disciples. You are good people.

However, the story says that it was these good, full-time religious, theologically informed, dedicated people just like us who quite unintentionally kept a person in need from getting to Jesus. Inside the house there are people listening to Jesus. Outside the house there is a paralyzed man in desperate need, his desperate friends trying to get him some help, a man confined forever to this bed, utterly dependent on his friends to help him get to Jesus and they can't....because of people like us.¹

There are two bouncers standing in the front of every church. And those bouncers are you and me.

Now I use the word “unintentional” because there is a significant difference between the bouncers in the commercial and most of the bouncing that you and I do. Those in the commercial are intentional about keeping different kinds of people out of the church. You and I, on the other hand, most of the time don't realize what we are doing that is uninviting to others.

Marion and I know a younger couple who just moved to a new city and are looking for a new church home. They have gone to a number of different churches, looking for the right fit. Recently, I asked them what they look for in a new church home.

They responded, “You can tell a lot about a congregation during their ‘time for joys and concerns.’ If the preacher stands up and tells only about every ailment in the church, particularly surrounding the older generation, or if members of the church only stand up and request prayers for their sufferings, then we never go back. We only return to those congregations that, in addition to lifting up concerns, they lift up joys and praises, and are intentional about recognizing, during that time, the accomplishments of their young people.”

I have a lot of friends who are good people. They pray. They serve in their community. They spend time talking to one another about Jesus. However, when it comes to church....well, they don't go. They say, the biggest objection they have to church is the church—us faithful, good, well intentioned people. You and I are the bouncers out in front of the church and most of the time we don't even realize it.

Pastor Will Willimon was talking to a woman at a local diner and said, “I wish you would come to our church. I know you have it rough with the job and kids and all. I think it would be a comfort to you if you came.”

¹ Willimon, William. “Followers Hinder Jesus.” *Pulpit Resource*. Inver Grove Heights: Logos Productions, February 19, 2006.

“Preacher,” she said, “I’ll be honest. When I get done at my job, with 50 hours on my feet waiting tables, my feet are so swollen that I can’t get into a pair of Sunday shoes. And I’ve seen the kind of people who come to your church. I can’t go in there without Sunday dress shoes. That’s why I don’t come to church.”²

Some of you may be thinking, “Well, these are all just excuses. The prayer concerns of the church, what you are expected to wear, the style of worship, the lack of hospitality, little or no focus given to children and youth---those are all just excuses for people not to come to church.” Are they? Or are we just so caught up in crowding the Jesus *we* want to see, that the church has become paralyzed by being the church?

Fortunately the story does not end here. The crowd, all clustered about Jesus, nearly defeated the man and his friends but not quite. They hacked that hole in Jesus’ roof, and while the crowd stood there with their mouths open, Jesus healed the man. He miraculously told him to get up and walk and go home healed.

“I don’t care about the roof,” said Jesus. “I’m here to raise the dead, not worry about roofing.” And do you remember what the crowd said? With one voice they said, “We never saw anything like this.”

We never saw a Savior who wanted to reach out beyond his inner circle in order to save. We never knew a Lord who took delight in having his house wrecked in order that people in need might get in to see him. We never saw a Messiah who reached out beyond the bounds of the saved in order to touch the lost. We never saw a teacher who demanded that his best students move away from him and let those in greater need get to him. We never saw anything like this.³

There was a fine Episcopalian congregation that built a beautiful new church, but on the edge of one of the poorest parts of town. People warned them that might not be a good idea, to build such a fine church in that part of town.

Sure enough, no sooner was the church building built and dedicated to God than one night somebody knocked the lock off the door and broke in. Next morning, they looked around to see what had been taken. Nothing was missing.

The locks were repaired, the doors again locked. A week later, locks broken, door forced open. They could see some muddy footprints up and down the halls of the church but again, after an extensive inventory of the church’s belongings, nothing was found missing.

Next week the janitor happened to be talking with the priest and said, “You know, of all the places I’ve worked, this church uses more toilet paper than any place I’ve ever been. I’ve had to order twice the toilet paper here than at any other place I’ve worked.”

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Immediately, the priest realized why people were breaking into the church. He stood there with the janitor, in the hall, and said, “This church doesn’t have to go looking for its mission. When people have to break into the church to get toilet paper, it’s time we take the locks off the door.”⁴

Yes, *we* need to work on tearing down our barriers and divisions in order that we can live into our theme, “Becoming Church Beyond our Walls.” However, we also need to be aware of how our community and our neighbors might be trying to break down those same walls. Perhaps how they breach our roof or break off our locks can indicate ways that we might be inhibiting Jesus from reaching out through us.

It might be what we wear. It might be our unwillingness to change. It might be our focus on ourselves and not our neighbors. It might be the locks on our doors. Whatever it is, may we begin to identify the ways that we might be crowding Jesus a little too much. May we say to people in need, people paralyzed and desperate, “Go ahead, knock a hole in our roof, break the chains off our building, so that Jesus can touch you and make you whole. It’s not fair of us to keep him to ourselves.”

There are two bouncers at the front of every church—they are you and me.

Amen.

⁴ Ibid.