

February 23, 2020

Mark 2:1-5

Today, and for the next five Sundays, our Lenten sermon series, Living a Just Peace Life, will be focusing on many of the justice commitments of our newly formed UCC Conference; justice commitments that Amicable's leadership says are our church's commitments as well. For some of these justice issues our focus will be on going deeper into an issue we at Amicable Church are already trying to live into. For others our focus will be on laying the groundwork for going deeper into the issue in the future.

As I noted in the email blast this past Friday, I believe this sermon series is the most important series of my ministry here at Amicable Church. This is because I am convinced that Amicable Church's future is dependent on our ability to educate ourselves about, and then to live into, these very important justice commitments.

We begin with being Accessible to All, known in the UCC as A2A. I put this first originally, because I felt it was the easiest to deal with and because it didn't really feel like a justice issue to me at the time. Easy to deal with, because we have already, at great expense of time and treasure, made our building accessible.

Another reason for focusing on A2A today is that today, on the church's liturgical calendar, this is Transfiguration Sunday; the Sunday we celebrate the disciples seeing Jesus transformed into dazzling white and welcomed by Moses and Elijah. It seemed appropriate to talk about our church building being transformed on Transfiguration Sunday.

The more I pondered the justice issues we will be looking at this Lenten season and the more I pondered the scripture passage we chose for this Sunday (the one just read), the more I came to understand the true depth and breadth of A2A and why it is a justice issue. Making our building accessible to all is of

vital importance. Whose faith is so large that they are willing to find a crane to raise someone up to the roof just to get into the building?

Making our building physically accessible to all is of great importance. It is the outward sign that we want everyone to feel invited and welcomed into our church building and our community of faith. (I don't want to imply that churches, whose buildings are not fully accessible, do not want everybody to feel invited and welcomed into their church. It does take a great deal of money and time to make this happen and not all churches can afford this.) We have done it, but we still have a large mortgage to go with it. (This is an unashamed plug to anyone who would like to help us pay down our mortgage.)

Having a building be physically accessible is vital, if we want people to hear the good news of God's love revealed in Jesus the Christ. But, in truth, an accessible building is only the beginning of an A2A congregation. Wanting any, and all, to have access we have to make them feel seen and welcome. Here at Amicable we pride ourselves on being a welcoming congregation. But, are we?

When someone in a wheelchair comes to worship, where do they "park" their transport? At the back of the bus? Or down here in front, the center of everyone's attention? Wouldn't it be a warmer welcome to cut out part of a couple of our pews so someone in a wheelchair can sit in the middle, surrounded and cared for by the whole worshipping body?

Even with this example, we are still talking about the physical aspects of accessibility, about "hearing" the good news. The paralyzed man, carried in by friends, would not have experienced the good news of God's love, if Jesus had not noticed him, welcomed him, and offered him encouraging

words of support, which healed him. The good news of God's love has to be more than heard, it has to be experienced.

I do believe Amicable Church is a warm and caring and welcoming community. I also know that it can be hard for someone new to break into a tight knit community like ours. I am not going to use guilt here. The truth is, as we get to know one another, we tend to reach out to those we know in coffee hour, because we know them and because we haven't seen each other for a week, or longer. We want to catch up. Of course, this leaves the person who is new all alone with a coffee cup, a cookie, and left out, feeling unseen and unwelcomed. Not everyone is an extrovert, and even an extrovert might not want to jump into another couple's conversation. It can be hard to get into, become a part of, a community.

The reality is A2A is more than just about physical accessibility. A2A is a challenge to welcome into one's community those who are different. Welcome implies more than offering a cup of coffee and a cookie. It is a wanting to get to know and understand a person; to affirm them in who they are, to learn about them and maybe even of their distress, and possibly help them to see who or what they might grow into, in and through God's love shared, flowing in and through us.

A2A is about openness; openness to understanding the injustices in our world and openness to people affected and afflicted by an injustice.

We become an A2A congregation, when we work at understanding the injustices that afflict so many people in our world, even if we are not affected by the injustice or think we are not the cause of a particular injustice. We work at understanding the injustices of this world by taking time to learn about them, but, more importantly, by welcoming in and listening to the people who bear the brunt of an injustice. As we welcome them into our community and listen to their story, an

understanding and a relationship can grow. And, our understanding and being in relationship will change us, transform us, and the world.

In this sense, A2A is the foundational justice issue. If we, as a congregation, are not A2A, then there is no possibility of us learning from those different from ourselves and, without this relational learning there is no chance of becoming truly Open and Affirming, Welcoming of Immigrants, Racially and Culturally Aware, able to see and speak out about the Violence Against Women, or express a willingness to care for God's creation, truly the silent voice of despair.

Returning to Jesus and the paralyzed man, Amicable Church has taken a major step forward in our goal of living into being A2A, accessible to all. After all, now the paralytic man can get in the building. But are we willing to welcome him and listen to him or even look at him? Are we willing to see what keeps him immobile? Are we willing to help him find a way to stand and carry his mat and go home? Or, are we the scribes, wondering whether this is our responsibility or not? Whether the man is deserving or not?

In the coming weeks we will be hearing about issues of justice that keep some people out, even as the system elevates others. As a people of God seeking to live into being an A2A congregation, we are called to welcome in and listen to issues that may seem foreign to us. We are called to wonder and try to understand those treated unjustly by an unjust system. As our knowledge grows, as our welcome deepens relationships, we will move closer and closer to being a community of faith that is truly A2A.

As we seek to live into God's justice may Amicable's beacon light of God's love grow ever brighter this Lenten season, allowing any and all of God's children access to the healing and wholeness relationship with God offers. Amen.