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Epiphany III B (Mark 1:14-20)

So “After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” (Mark 1:14, NRSV)

So what *is* this good news Jesus is proclaiming? “Repent, and believe in the good news.” What is that? Is it like “regular” news? Like something we’d see in the *New York Times* or hear on NPR or see on MSNBC or FOX? Is it like, “Oil prices are down?” or “Warmer weather has arrived?” Is it *real* news? Or is it *fake* news?

What the heck is the good news that Jesus Christ proclaims?

C’mon, help me out here!

OK, I’ll let you off the hook. But I really want to know:

- What is the good news to you as an individual?
- What is the good news to us as a community?
- And if we can figure that out, and believe it, how should *we* proclaim it? Because if it’s really good news, then we should let everybody know, right?

I’ll get you started.

This is how I hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

Number 1: God loves me. God loves me, God loves you, God loves just *everybody*. Even people I find very difficult to love. Even people I find *impossible* to love. I believe this to the bottom of my soul.

Number 2: God forgives me. God forgives me, God forgives you, God forgives just *everybody*. Even people I find very difficult to forgive. Even people I find *impossible* to forgive. I believe this to the bottom of my soul.

Now this, my people, I think is very good news indeed, because there are a whole lot of people who feel very unloved and a whole lot of people who think that no one could ever forgive them.

I was one of those people.

At one time I truly thought that I was such a piece of dogmeat that God couldn't possibly love me.

I mean if enough people tell you you're deficient or stupid or worthless because you're *different*, you may start to believe them. I did. And some of us turn to alcohol or drugs or another addiction just to blot out the pain.

But at some point, that turned around.

I entered "the rooms" of Alcoholics Anonymous and was told the trite-but-true "Let us love you until you can love yourself." Yeah, it took some time, but ever-so-slowly I began to love myself. To see myself as worthy of dignity and respect and yes, love. It wasn't until I could say to myself, "You are worthy of love" that I could accept that a) other people might love me, and b) well, maybe, just maybe, *God* might love me.

It was a pretty big shock, but it slowly sunk in. I said it to myself in wonder: "I am loved. I am loved. I am loved." Go ahead: Close your eyes and say gently to yourself, "I am loved. I am loved. I am loved."

Good. Now remember it.

Then there was the forgiveness part. That was hard, too. Part of my program was, as I said, to begin to love myself. The next part was to admit the really bad stuff I'd done and to start forgiving myself. To understand that the bad stuff I'd done was yes, bad and wicked and evil but that those things came from a dark place in my soul that was beginning to heal. I had to understand that it wasn't *me*, the essential *me*, that was wicked – for, after all, I now knew that I was loved.

And then, of course, I needed to confess to God. Because along this journey I had re-entered the Episcopal Church and received the sacraments and said the General Confession but that wasn't quite enough. So I wrote out my sins – it was a pretty long list – and confessed them to God with a priest who was also in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. There were a few times when he said, "Oh, come on... that's not a sin. Stop being so hard on yourself." But then he offered God's forgiveness.

And wow.

It seems to me that if we can accept two very basic aspects of Jesus' proclamation we've got some pretty damn good news to share. There are people out there – hurting people, people who think they are unloveable and who feel so unloved and so unforgiven. They need to hear this good news.

Perhaps we should follow Jesus' example and take the risk of sharing the good news with someone who might find a progressive, open-minded way of being church good news as well.

If God's love is this generous, if God's *forgiveness* is this generous, how can we possibly hold it to ourselves? How can we *not* proclaim it?

"Oh, that's not the Episcopal way," you might say.

Well, I challenge you: If you accept that it is not "the Episcopal way," that it smacks too much of the dreaded "E" word (that's E for evangelism, in case you missed the memo), really, we should just close those doors and turn out the lights.

Because the good news *is* good news! You have no *idea* who might need to hear it!

And spreading the good news is so much more than putting butts in the pews – spreading the good news is expressing our own gratitude for God's love. Spreading the good news is expressing our gratitude for God's forgiveness. Spreading the good news is about fighting for justice because *everyone* is loved. It's about sheltering homeless people and refugees and undocumented workers because *everyone* is loved.

It's about showing up and speaking up and refusing to accept the status quo.

And it's about saying, "Thank you, God. I love you, too."

Amen.