

Sunday September 1, 2024

FIRST LESSON: 1 Peter 2:2–3

GOSPEL READING: Mark 7: 1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Sermon Series: Read the Story: Get Closer

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- **We are continuing** our 12-week journey through the sermon series "Read the Story," focusing on the profound lessons found in the first epistle of Peter, tying in new gospel lessons each week and we are in the gospel of Mark.
- This week we are reading the story with the emphasis of **Getting Closer**.
- In our lives, there are moments when we find ourselves at a crossroads, faced with challenges that push us to either confront them or turn away.
- It's human nature, when faced with conflict or discomfort, to want to distance ourselves, to retreat to a place of safety where we don't have to deal with the messiness of it all.

- But in doing so I have learned in my own life experience, **we miss out**—plain and simple.
- **We miss out** on solutions, **we miss out** on the chance to create something new, **we miss out on** the possibilities of what could be, what should be, and what may be.
- When we choose to get closer—to the people in our community, to the issues we face, to the conflicts that arise—**we allow ourselves to get to the heart of the matter.**
- Whether it's a person, a place, or a problem, drawing near gives us the opportunity to understand deeply, to connect meaningfully, and to discover the paths forward that would otherwise remain hidden.
- In our stories, getting close is not just about proximity; it's about engagement.
- It's about being willing to step into the hard places and confront the uncomfortable truths.
- It's about realizing that the only way to truly live into the fullness of what God calls us to be **is**

by refusing to run away and instead leaning in, together, as a community.

- However, I would be remiss if I did not say that this concept of getting closer, of leaning into the difficult and uncomfortable, often runs counter to the worldviews many of us were raised with.
- In a culture that frequently values independence, self-preservation, and quick fixes, the idea of moving toward conflict or discomfort can feel unnatural or even risky.
- Many of us were taught, either explicitly or implicitly, that when things get tough, the best response is to protect ourselves—by avoiding confrontation, by putting up walls, or by distancing ourselves from the people or situations that cause us pain.
- This mindset is deeply ingrained in many cultural narratives that emphasize self-reliance and the notion that vulnerability is a weakness rather than a strength.

- Moreover, our upbringing can shape our instinct **to avoid rather than engage.**
- **For some**, the home was a place where conflict was met with silence or withdrawal, teaching us that problems are best left unspoken or ignored.
- **Others** may have been raised in environments where disagreement was discouraged, leading to a fear of what might happen if we truly confront the issues that matter.
- This aversion to getting close is also reinforced by broader societal messages **that prioritize efficiency and instant results.**
- We are often conditioned to believe that if something is difficult, **it's better to move on to something easier, rather than investing the time and emotional energy required to work through the hard stuff.**
- **However, I stopped by to proclaim that the gospel challenges these assumptions.**

- Jesus' life and teachings call us to a different way—a way that embraces vulnerability, community, and the hard work of reconciliation.
- **Getting closer** is about choosing a path that might be uncomfortable, countercultural, **and even contrary to how we've been taught to navigate the world**, but it's the path that leads to true connection, healing, and transformation.
- The concept of getting closer—whether to people, places, or conflicts—finds profound resonance in the Gospel of Mark.
- In Mark, we encounter a moment where Jesus challenges the religious leaders and the crowd **to look beyond surface-level observances** and get to the heart of true righteousness.
- This passage invites us to reflect on how our tendencies to stay at a distance, whether from others, our problems, or even God, can prevent us from understanding and living out the deeper truths of our faith.

- The Gospel of Mark is often considered the earliest of the four Gospels, likely written around 70 CE.
- Traditionally attributed to John Mark, a companion of both Paul and Peter, this Gospel is characterized by **its urgency and immediacy, often using the word “immediately” to move the narrative along.**
- Mark’s Gospel was likely written for a community of early Christians in Rome or Syria, who were facing persecution and needed encouragement to remain steadfast in their faith.
- Mark’s audience was likely composed of Gentile Christians, who may not have been as familiar with Jewish customs.
- This is reflected in the Gospel’s focus on the actions and deeds of Jesus rather than on extensive teachings or parables.
- **The community Mark was addressing** was struggling with the implications of following

Jesus in a world that was often hostile to their faith.

- This context gives the Gospel a sense of urgency, as it seeks to fortify believers in their commitment to Christ.
- In Mark 7:1-8, we see a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and some teachers of the law.
- **They accuse Jesus' disciples** of not following the traditional purity laws, specifically the ritual washing of hands before eating.
- The Pharisees were deeply concerned with external observances, believing that adherence to these rituals was essential for maintaining holiness and righteousness.
- Jesus responds by quoting Isaiah, accusing them of honoring God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him.
- **Jesus challenges them** by saying that they have let go of the commandments of God and are holding on to human traditions.

- **In verses 14-15**, Jesus turns to the crowd and further explains that **it's not what goes into a person that defiles them, but what comes out of them....that's some food for thought!**
- He emphasizes that **true impurity comes from within, from the heart, and is expressed through evil intentions and actions.**
- **Finally, in verses 21-23**, Jesus lists the things that truly defile a person: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. **These are all matters of the heart, pointing to the internal brokenness that leads to hurtful and disruptive actions.**
- The personal takeaway that I am seeing from this passage is that it reveals the dangers of staying at a distance from the heart of the matter.

- The Pharisees and teachers of the law were focused on external purity, **missing the deeper issues of the heart.**
- They were more concerned **with maintaining religious appearances than with the true righteousness** that comes from a transformed heart.
- **Their failure to get closer** to the deeper issues—such as the motivations and intentions behind their actions—led to a superficial practice of faith that Jesus condemns.
- Had the Pharisees **been willing to get closer**, to engage with the heart of God’s commandments rather than merely their human traditions, **they might have avoided the outcome of being rebuked by Jesus.**
- By getting closer, they would have recognized **that true defilement is not about external rituals but about the condition of one’s heart.**

- Similarly, the crowd that Jesus addresses is **invited to move beyond a surface understanding of purity and righteousness.**
- **Jesus calls them to look inward, to examine their hearts, and to recognize that true holiness is not about what is outside but what is inside.**
- For the first time ever in our Wednesday night programming, Our Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life Class did not follow our routine process of directly engaging in this week's gospel lesson—hence why you have not heard me report back any specific questions or thoughts the class may have had as it relates to our gospel story today.
- Would you like to know why?
- Well, let's just say that is how stirring the sermon was from last week—for we as a class could not get past Jesus in the conclusion of John 6, confronting the community with the question, **“Are you offended?”**

- Over the past five years, our church community has undergone significant changes.
- Post-COVID, we've become more diverse in every way—new faces have joined us, while some of our long-standing members have not returned for a myriad of reasons.
- This evolution has brought both opportunities and challenges.
- As we navigate this new landscape, some of us are struggling with the idea that essentially, on many levels we all have felt offended by what life has thrown our way as a community, both individually and collectively!
- **Some of us are offended** by the isms we have experienced throughout our lives: racism, sexism, classism, and the list goes on.
- **Some of us are offended** by how cruel and unfair life has just been as a whole.
- **Some of us are offended** because of the political tension we are experiencing.

- So I supposed this question, “Are you offended,” was most challenging because, on many levels, we knew our answer **was yes... we are offended—we were offended by being offended, which raised a level of unanticipated defensiveness—that made it impossible to follow the typical process of the class!**
- It was a tough conversation that we faced head-on.
- It wasn’t easy—emotions ran high, and it could have gone in many different directions.
- But we stuck it out, and something remarkable happened: true connection.
- We didn’t shy away from the difficult topics; we leaned in, even when it was uncomfortable.
- And in that moment, I had one of those “aha” moments as a preacher/leader—**don’t be afraid to talk about the tough stuff—for as long as we are in this life together— bound by love and a commitment to serving in this**

worship community by way of our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness—even if it looks differently in the way in which we do so—because news flash, **it is supposed to be different— because all of us are uniquely different and divinely created in the image of God**—then the good news is we will get through the tough stuff....in fact it is absolutely guaranteed we will!

- You see Church family, **when we stay engaged**—when we refuse to walk away even when we're hurt, disappointed, or offended—**we open the door to real, transformative solutions.**
- **We begin to crack the code** on what it means to be a true community, committed to each other through thick and thin....**this is the process** of how we get closer to one another...
- **This is the process** of how we get to the heart of one another's thoughts, feelings, life story, experiences...

- **It is a process** that is challenging!
- **It is a process** that is messy!
- **It is a process** that is frightening!
- **It is a process** that requires vulnerability!
- **It is a process** that is frustrating!
- **It is a process** that is enduring!
- It was a process that will go down as one of the best ministry experiences I had ever experienced... in fact, I have never felt more alive!
- As a preacher, you all have often heard me complain about wanting to preach about blueberries and butterflies —my biggest aha moment is that we would have never got to this place by talking about blueberries and butterflies!
- Leading me to proclaim... **I get it Jesus**...this is what love looks like!
- **I get it Jesus**...this is what working out our faith look like...

- **I get it Jesus**...this is what working towards fulfilling that great commandment of loving one another as you oh God loves us looks like— love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control!
- It was a great night for us being together in that way.
- Some of us stuck around after the class, and one of the participants was prompted to ask for a picture.....
- It wasn't planned or rehearsed—
- In fact, I was pinching myself because it would have been awesome to capture an entire group photo—
- However, let these couple of pictures serve as a mustard seed of consideration for our larger worship community and beyond—what can happen we choose to not leave—when we choose to make a commitment to get closer—thereby ending this sermon with a question...

Do You Get It?

- May the words from my mouth and the thoughts of all our collective hearts be acceptable in your Holy and Righteous sight...our Lord, our Rock, our Strength and Support! Amen