

5 Epiphany B, February 5, 2012;

The Very Rev. Canon James A. Newman

When someone walks into the church on a weekday or a Sunday and asks to know more about the Episcopal Church, I first ask about the faith tradition in which they were raised and in which they may (or may not) practice. Southern California is as culturally diverse as Hawaii – maybe more so because we have so many more people – and I hear St. Paul’s advice in today’s Epistle.

Paul even went further than I do. I am not a Muslim for Muslims, or a Jew for Jews, or a Roman Catholic for Roman Catholics, but I do respect the various religions and cultural communities and attempt to know enough to speak to each person in a way that he or she can hear.

We are called to become all things for all people, to work for salvation, for the sake of the Gospel, and to be full partners in that ministry. People do not come to St. Christopher’s just because it is sitting on Kainalu Drive, just because we inside are nice people, or just because Episcopalians have an amazing tradition of worship and music.

Polls show we are an unchurched land these days because many identify all Christians with the excesses of television fundamentalists who “know how bad their listeners are,” who know how you have to believe exactly, what their Bibles say in order to be saved, who know that your salvation is tied to the amount you give them for their ministries, and who are more than glad to tell you which or who are not allowed into God’s house or at Jesus’ table.

The only problem is that when they preach that message, they wound the Body of Christ. They distort the message of God. And they grieve the Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ ministry was one that sought to expand God’s horizon, not limit it, to open doors, not close them, to move from law and toward

grace, so that the peace that passes all understanding would lead to freedom in the Lord.

Today's lesson follows immediately (one of Mark's favorite words – immediately) after last Sunday's Gospel. It is the Sabbath and Jesus goes to the synagogue. Jesus heals, breaking a rule. People are amazed at Jesus' authority. Jesus, James and John went to the home of Simon and Andrew. There, Simon's mother-in-law is ill. Jesus "took her by the hand" (which was not done in those days), "raised her up" (yet more work on the Sabbath, which is not allowed), and then she served them, suggesting that a woman's work is never done, but also that she is well and that she was healed on the Sabbath. One can ask, "Was she that sick?" If not, couldn't Jesus have waited until the Sabbath was over so as to avoid more controversy? No.

At Sunset (that is after the Sabbath), more mentally ill and physically ill people are brought to Jesus. Note that Jesus' ministry always was on the edge.

It's the Sabbath. Jesus violates laws about that. Peter's mother-in-law – a woman – is ill and thus unclean. And Jesus touches her (also on the Sabbath), so he is unclean.

Jesus seeks to spread this message beyond Capernaum and is so busy that in just two more chapters he will have gathered large crowds, upset people by forgiving sins, called a tax collector to follow him, eaten with tax collectors and sinners, and violated rules on fasting and Sabbath work, upsetting the Pharisees.

If you want a safe deity, you are in the wrong place. If you want a rule follower, you are in the wrong place. If you want only good people walking in the door, forget it; Jesus said he came to call sinners – us.

It is why Jesus' message is so urgent. It is why Paul reached out to just the people he had been persecuting.

Long before Paul, and long before Jesus, the prophet Zechariah wrote about God and gives us both a promise and hope: “God’s understanding is beyond human reach (beyond expectation), giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. Thanks be to God. Amen.