Sunday February 24, 1974

"DOING MIGHTY WORKS" Matthew 13:53-58

In the scripture lesson just read from the Gospel of Matthew, there appears a rather strange statement, at least it sounds that way at first, and we usually pass over it without too much thought about it. It goes this way -- "And Jesus did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief."

The background of the statement is this. Jesus had come back to his home territory. He had been teaching and preaching and healing for a time outside his home town and had met with some success in his ministry. He had a group of disciples and he had other followers. People were beginning to talk about him and his message. Now that he was back home for a visit, he began to teach in the local synagogue. Although many of the home town folks had no doubt heard of his spreading fame and his mighty works, now that they themselves heard him, they were surprised and astonished.

They asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" They might also have added -- "We knew him when he was a little boy growing up in this town." They could only think of Jesus as they remembered him in the past. They had a kind of blindness to what he was in the present. We know that problem.

It is following this episode that we have the very revealing statement, "He did not do many might works there because of their unbelief." The gospel according to Mark includes the same incident, but Mark even puts the statement more strongly, and perhaps more correctly. He reports, "Jesus could do no mighty works there!" And again the reason for the limitation of the work of Jesus is that the people were not willing to receive him; they had no faith in him. It wasn't because he didn't have the power, but that his power was limited by the response or rather lack of response of the people around him.

In another story in the Gospels, just the opposite is the case. In that incident in the ministry of Jesus, we are told of four men tho bring a crippled man to Jesus for healing. There was a large crowd around Jesus inside and

outside the house so that the people could not get through. Yet these men had so much faith in the power of Jesus that they went up on the roof of the house where Jesus was, they opened the roof and then let the man down to where Jesus was so that he could be healed. The Bible reports that when Jesus saw their faith, that is the faith of the four men who had carried the crippled man, he healed the man. Thus again the Gospels indicate that it was on the basis of the faith of those around Jesus that he was able to do mighty works.

The point is, God's power to do great things in our lives and in the lives of others who may have very little faith and in the life of the church as it ministers to the world, is conditioned very much by our faith, by our expectancy, by our carrying out our responsibilities.

It's as if we can short-circuit the power of God as did the people in Jesus' home town. Or we can be instruments of letting the power of God flow through us and do mighty works. When I came to this congregation a little over two years ago, my first sermon was entitled, "Introduction to our Mutual Ministry." In that sermon, I expressed my hope that we would be able to minister to each other and that together we would be able to minister with power to others.

Earlier than that in my first sermon in this church when I accepted the position, I spoke on the theme --"Helping Miracles Happen," and in that sermon also expressed the hope that together as a congregation could we help miracles happen. The point of that sermon was that if we each bring whatever resources and talents we have and if together we use them responsibly in and through the church, miracles do happen.

I mention all of th is again, because this morning we have installed the newly elected members of the various boards of the church. These, along with the other members of the boards and committees are the leaders we have chosen. It is our hope that with all of us working together we can do mighty works.

It is here that our text for the morning instructs us. The message of the text is this: that just as Jesus was limited in what he could do because of the lack of faith, lack of support and acceptance of the people in his home town, even more is this true of every church congregation.

The ministers, the church staff, are really nothing at all by themselves. A church school teacher, or any officer or Board in the church is really nothing at all in itself.

None of us can really do very many mighty works in isolation. Each person or committee or Board is very much limited. Their success or failure for doing God's work in a creative and healing way with power, depends very much on the relationship between those persons and the rest of the congregation. It depends on how the congregation surrounds its leaders with trust and faith and how we as a congregation are open to new ideas and how much all of us are willing to be ministers one to another.

This is what is unique about the church and its ability to do mighty works. There is nothing in the great religions of the world to compare with it. There is for example, no body of Buddhists which you can call the Buddhist Church. Buddhism is a religion and a person becomes a Buddhist by renouncing the world and becoming a Buddhist priest. He can, of course, declare that he accepts Buddhist teaching. But this is more of a private affair. There is not a body or community of believers to which he belongs or from which he receives strength and support. Christianity is something quite different. The mystery of the church is simply that it is people.

The only other societies with which Christianity can be compared are Judaism and Islam, because they share a common root in the Old Testament. They also take the idea of a community of persons, a kind of congregation, very seriously.

But it was Jesus Christ who above all emphasized -- "that where two or three or more are gathered together in my name, there am I also." Thus it should not surprise us that Jesus himself found that he could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief."

The "mighty works" done by the church have always been done because of a community of believers, and if there is lack of faith and trust, that community lacks power.

Now of course in any group or community of persons, there always has to be some kind of division of responsibility, a division of labor. The early church discovered this quite soon after its beginning. In the book of Acts, in the New Testament, the members of the early church found

they could function more efficiently if they made assignments, elected leaders. So the twelve disciples said to the church congregation, "pick out from among you seven persons of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom," and give them various responsibilities to carry out.

This kind of division of responsibility continued in the early church for in Paul's letters to Timothy, he gave Timothy specific advice as to the kind of persons who should be chosen as leaders in a congregation.

And always after leaders were chosen, it was made clear that we can only do mighty works if there exists the kind of faith and trust among us which lets God's power flow through us. This does not mean that we do not at times disagree or have conflicts, but it does mean that underneath it all is a kind of basic faith.

But are there any more specific things we can do as church leaders and as members of a congregation so that we will be helping the church do mighty works? This morning I want to mention only two, and after I mention them, they may seem quite obvious to you.

First of all, this congregation or any congregation can do mighty works only in-so-far as the members and leaders of the congregation pray for the leaders.

In talking about praying for the minister, Bishop Gerald Kennedy used to say humorously, "If you want to get rid of your minister, get the congregation to unite in prayer for him. He will become so effective that some larger church will take him off your hands."

All of the church leaders installed this morning, as well as those who are already members of the various boards and we as ministers, need your prayers very very much if this congregation is to do the mighty works required of it.

Secondly, if we are to do mighty works and have the faith which enables us to carry out our work, this involves the sheer necessity of being faithful, in season and out, to what is our ultimate business--the worship of God. Being faithful in worship is what keeps renewing our lives at their roots, at the deep springs of our being. Everything else follows from it.

If we are to be leaders in this church and through this church be leaders in the religious life of this community, then we need ourselves to be in touch with God and to be growing and maturing in our faith. To do this requires our regular participation in public worship.

The spiritual life is not an experience only for the saints, or for a select few who by a lifetime of discipline have pried loose a few of its secrets. It is everyone's rightful inheritance; it is the sure ground beneath all of us.

However, worship as we are talking about it,implies some discipline on our part. By and large, we reap what we sow, or reap little if we have sowed little. We draw dividends in proportion to our investment. Our inner life is rich and sturdy, or it is poverty-stricken and flabby, according to the amount of disciplined effort we have put into cultivating it. We finally become what we work away at becoming.

The familiar parable of the wild duck, attributed to Soren Kierkegaard is very much to the point.

The story is that there was once a wild duck that had become separated from his migrating flock and happened to land among a flock of domestic ducks in a farmyard. The wild duck joined them in eating the corn that the farmer was feeding them, and liked it so well that he lingered until the next meal, and the next and the next. He stayed a week, a month, two months. Finally the autumn came and his wild companions flew over the farmyard on their southward flight. Their familiar call reminded him that it was time to be away. He felt the old ecstasy within him again and he began flapping his wings in order to join them in the wide sky. But he could not get off the ground. He had grown too fat during those months of lazy existence in the barnhard. So he had no choice but to remain there. Each Spring and fall he heard the call of his wild friends passing over, but each year their calls seemed fainter and less real until at last he no longer noticed them.

This is an illustration of what may happen to a Christian who becomes so involved in the day to day activities of his work or of the church that he or she loses the sensitivity to the spiritual realities and becomes sort of satisfied with the routines of life and becomes finally dulled and flabby. Somehow we need to continue to prod ourselves into

new life and continue to seek wider and higher horizons. Worship regularly of the right kind can help us do that.

This church will only do mighty works as we as a congregation and particularly the leaders increase our spiritual depths through regular and disciplined worship

Again, it needs to be emphasized that genuine worship implies a discipline. It is something to be worked at regularly, just as an athlete works at getting in shape for whatever sport he or she is involved in. The most single important thing a church does in a given week is to gather its people for the public worship of God. From that stems everything else. The church is the only institution to which we belong that keeps reminding us of the eternal dimensions of our lives.

So as our newly elected church leaders begin their work for this year and the coming years, I urge all of you to make a covenant with yourselves and with God to be regular participants at public worship. For as your spiritual depths are increased, your faith will be increased, and then together we will be able to do mighty works. Amen.