

Franchising Jesus
(Act 4:32-38 and Mark 9:38-50)

Two greedy men died and were taken up to heaven to be questioned by St. Peter. Weighing the good they had each done on earth against all the bad – particularly out of greediness – St. Peter told them that they would be given one chance to be admitted into heaven.

So the men were seated across from one another at a large table. The table was overflowing with an abundance of delicious food. Now these two guys liked to eat. Staring at the spread set before them, they decided this must truly be heaven.

But they were about to discover “the hell of it all.” Soon the men realized that a long fork and spoon had been lashed to each of their arms. The unwieldy eating utensils were too long for each man to use. So, in matter of agonizing days both men starved to death while sitting at that bountiful table. They were immediately cast down into eternal damnation. They had discovered the “the hell of it all.”

Now at about the same time, two women died and they too were taken up to heaven for interrogation by St. Peter. Again, he took stock of their lives – weighing the good they had done against the bad. St. Peter decided they too should be given a chance to enter heaven.

So the two women were taken to that same room and where seated across from one another at that same large table. The table was again overflowing with large amounts of delicious food. Before they could dig in, the women also discovered that the

same long fork and spoon had been lashed to their arms. Confused by this strange turn of events, the women stared at each other and the ridiculous utensils tied to their arms. They contemplated the situation for some time as they grew very hungry.

The tantalizing aroma of all that delicious food tormented them, just as it had tormented the other two guys. After a time of suffering silence, one woman speared a piece of tender succulent roast beef with the long fork-like extension of her arm. Carefully, she offered it to her friend sitting across the table. The grateful woman gobbled down the meat, thanking her friend. Then she dipped the spoon-like extension of her arm into a bowl of chicken soup and gently fed the other woman. And so, the women feasted on the bountiful meal and were received into heaven.

While the two men could only see “the hell of it all” the two women, on the other hand, saw a heavenly opportunity. By cooperating with one another they could enjoy God’s bountiful feast. When we consider the situations in our lives, what do we see – “the hell of it all” or a heavenly opportunity. Please pray with me:

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God, Creator of heaven and earth. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed. Guide us in the

ways of heavenly opportunity in your holy church. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

In the first part of the reading from Mark this morning, we encounter the disciples once again failing to understand an important aspect of Jesus and his ministry. John comes to Jesus hoping to be praised for attempting to stop an unnamed outsider from using Jesus' name to exorcise a demon. "We tried to stop him," John says, "because he was not following us." Now we don't know much about this "unnamed outsider" but we do know he is not a disciple – a least not one of the inner circle. We'll call him the "foreigner" – an outsider who casts out demons and heals in the name of Jesus.

Jesus takes the side of this foreigner, believing that anyone who is able to heal in his name should be free to do so. And why not? He tells John, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." Do you understand, John? It's not so difficult. Whoever is not against us must be for us. It just simple logic!

In a previous episode in Mark's gospel, the disciples encounter a young boy who is possessed by a demon. They try to cast out the demon, but are not successful. Jesus must come and heal the young man when the disciples fail. So in an ironic twist, we see the disciples now trying to prevent another from doing what they, in fact, could not do. It's jealousy or envy that motivates John as he attempts to disenfranchise this foreigner who just might be more successful than the disciples at doing the work of Jesus.

I used the word "disenfranchise" to refer to the disciples' attempt to keep this so-called foreigner from doing the work of Jesus. Jesus' attitude is truly the correct one. He doesn't care who is doing good work in his name. What's important is that somebody is out there doing it and succeeding where others have failed! "Whoever is not against me is for me!" Jesus is "franchising" the work of discipleship by including the foreigner" in his ministry.

Webster's College Dictionary defines "a franchise" as "... the right or license granted by a company to an individual to market its products or services in a specific territory." In telling the disciples that it's alright to allow others to do good works in the name of Jesus, he is franchising his ministry.

When we think of successful franchises in today's world we think of businesses like McDonald's. McDonald's grants the right to certain individuals to sell its fast food products in a specific location – at a McDonald's restaurant.

It may seem a little bit strange, but the church is essentially a franchise. Jesus grants a license to the foreigner by telling John to let him go about the work of healing. And so it is with the church and with us. Jesus has granted us a license to go into the world and do good work in his name: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, freeing the oppressed. The church is a franchise, licensed – that is to say – commissioned by Jesus to go in the world baptizing all nations and making disciples.

The foreigner raises an important issue for the church today. We've strayed a long way from the early church that emerged during the first century. It's described in verses 32 through 35 of chapter four of Acts:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had ... There were no needy among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

There were, of course, other attributes that gave the early church its identity. But this quote illustrates what was not happening between the disciples and the foreigner in our gospel lesson – a sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Like the disconnect between the disciples and the foreigner, there is a similar disconnect between the church today and the early church.

We are living in very different times today. Our economy has been uncertain at best since 2001. The rapid expansion of the nineties has shrunk. Growth has slowed. Resources are stretched thin these days, like so little butter spread over a large slice of bread. There is intense competition for consumers as businesses and individuals struggle to make ends meet and to be profitable at the end of the day. The church is no different!

We are now living in a time where survival may depend, to a large extent, on our ability to cooperate with each other – to be one in heart and mind like the early church. To cooperate like those two women did as they found a way to not starve sitting at that abundant table.

As we enter into this new era, the foreigner of Mark's gospel is telling us to franchise the work of Christ. We are the

hands of Christ in a world that has great needs. As our resources are spread thin we must still continue to be the hands of Christ to that world. The foreigner teaches us to become the ecumenical church.

In franchising the church, God sees only Christians called to be the hands of Christ to the world. The franchise is not exclusive. There is no United Methodist, no Presbyterian, no Lutheran, no Catholic, and no Pentecostal in the franchising of Jesus Christ. The franchising of Christ is non-denominational. It's not even inter-denominational – there is no Geneva UMC, no Winfield UMC, no Gary or Baker Memorial UMC; only the church universal – the church of Jesus Christ.

CBS radio newsman, Charles Osgood, once did a feature on two women who lived in a convalescent home. Both women had suffered incapacitating strokes. Margaret's stroke paralyzed her left side, while Ruth's stroke damaged her right side. Both of these women were accomplished pianists but had given up all hope of ever playing again.

One day, the director of the center sat Margaret and Ruth down at the piano and encouraged them to play solo pieces at the same time. Together they cooperated and made beautiful music. The image of these two women working together to make music could also be an image of the ecumenical church working together. What one cannot do well alone, two or more can do better together – in harmony with God. The relationship between our two congregations is an excellent example of this harmony. And so is our relationship with St. Andrews.

In the near future we will have an opportunity to expand our resources by

joining together with our cluster churches – Batavia, Geneva, and Baker Memorial. Together we will be looking for opportunities to franchise Jesus in worship, fellowship, mission, and evangelism with these churches. We hope to foster a spirit of cooperation rather than competition. Our objective will be to reach the disenfranchised with the message of the universal church.

We have an opportunity to combine our resources with others, to look for new and creative ways to work together – to look for ways to not only survive, but to thrive in face of difficult times. We have the opportunity to respond to the model of the early church – the pioneer franchisee – to be of one heart and mind with our cluster churches, to combine resources, and to continue to be the hands of Christ in the world. What one cannot do well alone, two or more – with like hearts and minds – can do in harmony – and do it even better – with God’s help.