

Finding Gospel in Mark's Gospel



Co-missioners,

So you thought we had it tough at church last month when we struggled through five successive Sundays of John 6? Comes suddenly another challenge for preachers and listeners alike: a stretch of texts from Mark 8 through 10 that leave us wondering where the good news is. “Take up your cross!” (Sept. 12). “Be last, not first!” (Sept. 19). “Millstone time!” (Sept. 26). “You

married folks: no putting asunder!" (Oct. 3). "You rich [American] camels: good luck!" (Oct. 10).

None of this sounds the least bit promising. That's why we point you this week to a few resources that will help you unearth the Gospel you're either called to deliver or invited to trust by the Promising One who pulls us to church every Sunday, including the ones on which texts like these are heard. The first three of these resources are lodged in our Crossings library. The fourth appears below in its first-ever publication.

All four of these items share a common assumption: the good news in this stretch of Mark is found exclusively in the One who is heading for Jerusalem to deal with the very messes he exposes along the way. The Spirit's aim as ever is to leave us exulting in the wonder of Christ Crucified for us.

For hints of how this can happen, check out the following—

Fred Niedner's exploration of the brutal "millstone and Gehenna" text, Mark 9:38-50, slated for a hearing this coming Sunday. Already it has preachers grasping frantically for something true to say that will alleviate the squirming disbelief they're bound to notice in the folks they're talking to. Here we're thinking of the innumerable preachers who haven't yet seen what Fred wrote. It was published only last Sunday. If you missed it too, then [read it here, right now](#)—and after that breathe deep, with thanks to God.

Do the same with Steve Albertin's three-year-old [analysis of the "divorce" text \(Mark 10:2-16\)](#), appointed by the lectionary for this year's October 3rd. Steve does what most interpreters fail to do. He follows Mark's lead. That is, he ties what Jesus say about divorce (10:2-12) to the subsequent episode of Jesus and the little children (Mark 10:13-16). Looking for Gospel amid a broken marriage or a broken anything else? There it is, as Steve

will point out.

The topic sentence for this entire section of Mark is “take up your cross and follow me.” See 8:31-38, heard in churches two Sundays ago and still stirring confusion in lots of minds that remember hearing it. Jerry Burce worked through this phrase at some length in [a Thursday Theology post six years ago](#). There too you’ll be taken to the core of Golgotha’s great promise. We think you’ll find it useful as you work through the rest of these “journey to Jerusalem” texts.

Finally, see below for Steve Kuhl’s take on the persistent problem our Lord addressed last week when he caught his disciples in the kind of rivalry that so mars the church today. Here too he says unpleasant things that rub against our sinner’s grain. We’ll find Jesus returning to much the same issue on October 17th. All the more reason for thinking more about it now.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

The Suffering Servant and Servant Leadership

by Steven C. Kuhl

The Gospel reading for last Sunday (Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Proper 20) was Mark 9:30-37. The passage consists of what may seem at first like two unrelated parts: a) Jesus' teaching his disciples, again, that he must be rejected, die and on the third day rise (9:30-32)—this is the second of Jesus' three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-33)—and b) Jesus' teaching in response to an embarrassing argument that arises among his disciples about who among them is the greatest (9:33-37). Understanding how these two “teachings” are linked is the immediate task at hand.

As always, context is key. A week or more earlier, while in Caesarea Philippi (8:27), Jesus has told his disciples “quite openly” (8:32) that the heart of his saving mission and meaning as the messiah is tied to the fact that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed, and on the third day rise again (8:31). He also tells them—and the whole crowd—that to be his disciple means for them to “deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him” (8:34). He then further explains (as counterintuitive as it may seem) that only by losing their lives for his sake and the gospel will they gain life (8:35). His disciples fail to understand this, of course (cf. 9:32). This is why Jesus now decides to take a little break from his public ministry so as to spend some “private time” (cf. 4:34) teaching his disciples—specifically, the twelve (cf. 9:35), those slotted for leadership after his resurrection—about the way of the cross.

(N.B. The problem of misunderstanding Jesus will plague the disciples throughout Jesus' earthbound time with them. For Mark, the disciples only figure out Jesus' meaning in hindsight: through revisiting Jesus' teaching after he is raised from the dead. That is the meaning of the cryptic statement of the “young

man” at the empty tomb: “There (in Galilee) you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7). The disciples will come to understand the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as they revisit all that he said and did with them in his Galilean ministry. In a sense, the Gospel of Mark is the Galilean ministry of Jesus revisited.)



In terms of the narrative structure of Mark, this break in Jesus’ public ministry is bracketed by Jesus’ second (9:30) and third (10:1) passion predictions, meaning that it is all about helping them to understand the meaning and implication of his way of the cross. But, as we will see, Jesus’ teaching will not be given in terms of formal lectures or sermons. Rather, it will be given as “teaching moments”: responses to real life challenges, experiences, and questions that the disciples themselves will face. During this interlude there will be two

such teaching moments. Both are related to the future role of the twelve as leaders in the Jesus movement after he is risen. Both also deal with the place or, rather, the problem of competitiveness within the community of Christ. The text at hand (9:33-37) deals with the problem of internal competitiveness between the twelve. The text we will encounter next Sunday (9:38-41) deals with external competitiveness between the twelve as a group and disciples beyond their ranks who are nonetheless operating (i.e., casting out demons) in Jesus' name. Spoiler alert: Jesus addresses both examples of competitiveness by articulating a radical understanding of "servant leadership."

Both these teaching moments take place while Jesus and his disciples are in Capernaum and most likely staying "in the house" (9:33) of Simon and Andrew (cf. 1:29). The first teaching moment comes when Jesus, out of the blue, asks his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?" (v. 33). Their "silence" (v. 34) reveals their embarrassment, which Mark explains to us: "They had argued with one another about who was the greatest" (v. 34). In other words, they are painfully aware of the contradiction between Jesus' way-of-being and their own.

Sparing them the pain of their embarrassment, Jesus "sat down" (the posture of a teacher) and "called the twelve" (the would-be leaders among his disciples) and explained: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (v. 35). Two things are of note. First, Jesus recognizes the need for leadership in his community of disciples, and he makes it plain that those who want to lead ("be first") should not be embarrassed to do so. But second—and here is the major point—leadership as Jesus understands it does not mean having privileges over others but exercising responsibility for others. In other words, it means "being last of all" (assuming no privileges over others) and "servant of all" (being responsible for the well-being of others).

Indeed, this is exactly the kind of servant leadership Jesus the Messiah (the chosen one) exercises by going the way of the cross. And this will not be first and only time Jesus will have to make this point about servant leadership. Ironically, immediately after Jesus' third passion prediction (10:32-34), James and John, the sons of Zebedee, will ask Jesus to give them what they mistakenly think are the places of privilege ("glory") when Jesus enters his glory in the kingdom of God (10:35). They miss the point about "glory." It is not about privilege but service. And in missing that point, they miss the best thing about Jesus, as Jesus will explain: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).



To further clarify and deepen this understanding of servant leadership, Jesus takes and embraces in his arms a little child and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (v. 37). This is a very carefully crafted teaching, designed to say many things at once.

First of all, servant leadership can be twisted into self-serving leadership. When we serve the powerful, we can easily do

it for the sake of gaining something back from them. But that's not the nature of servant leadership, and nothing illustrates that more than the service given to a child. They have nothing to give back.

Second, the fact that servant leadership gives freely, with no expectation of return, is also illustrated by Jesus' use of the term "welcome" to describe it. Servant leadership does not see the object of its service as a burden, but as something—and someone—that is welcomed.

Third, and perhaps most important, is the source out of which servant leadership comes. Note the "chain of welcome" or the "name in which" servant leadership materializes. God serves us, by serving and sending his Son Jesus, who in turn serves and sends us to serve others. Servant leadership is leadership rooted in the God who loves for the sake of loving, who serves for the sake of serving, who welcomes for the sake of welcoming. Servant leadership is what the God made known "in the name of Jesus" is all about. Servant leadership is the kind of leadership that has its source and summit in the Gospel.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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