

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

LOST IN POWER, SAVED IN WEAKNESS

Mark 6:1-13

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Mark 6:1 He [Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. 4Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." 5And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. 7He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." 12So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

DIAGNOSIS: Lost in Power

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Wisdom and Power versus Offense*

It must have been disconcerting to Jesus that, having “astounded” many with his “wisdom” (v. 2, presumably his proclamation and teachings about the Kingdom of God), they nonetheless “took offense at him” by citing their familiarity with his trade and with his family (v. 3). Sound familiar to anyone? More surprisingly (at least for us), Jesus “could do no deed of power there”—except that he cured a few people (v. 5). Jesus did not persuade them with his words, nor could he do any great deeds of power (miracles) among them. One failure leads to another. Makes one wonder which is the greater “offense” here, Jesus’ familiarity and humble background, or the people needing some show of power in order to substantiate the Kingdom of God.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Astounded versus Amazed*

Although “many who heard him were astounded” (v. 2), Jesus was “amazed at their unbelief” (v. 6). Although they had heard of his wisdom and miracles, they could not get over the fact that by trade or training he was a semi-skilled laborer or “carpenter” (v. 3, from the Greek word *tekton*, a wood-worker or stone-worker; a note for those conversant with the priority of Mark among the Gospel traditions: Jesus as *tekton* was also problematic for Matthew and Luke’s community—check out their parallel accounts!). They got so lost in what Jesus did with his own “hands” that they could not see or trust in any other source for his wisdom, let alone perceive the power of God at work in him. That was more than enough to keep them stuck in their unbelief (v. 6), and stuck just as powerfully in the universal axiom of self-reliance that “we are what we do.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Left Behind, Dusted Off*

So Jesus walked away, leaving them behind in their unbelief. Similarly, Jesus charged his disciples, “If they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them” (v. 11). That is what Jews did after leaving an “unclean place”—ritually leaving behind all that is not acceptable to God, as signified by “dust,” and that God is taking his promises elsewhere. The “testimony against them” is not only that no deed of power could be done among them (v. 5) but that those who remain unrepentant (v. 12) are as dust, and are finally dusted off, excluded from the Kingdom of God—which is worse than death.

PROGNOSIS: Saved in Weakness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Wisdom and Power of God*

This little snippet of Jesus’ ministry, albeit a failure, must be understood as Jesus understood it, that is, from within the Kingdom of God whose throne is the Cross. From this vantage point, not only is Jesus understood as “the Son of God” (15:39) but his entire ministry, failures and all, display the wisdom and power of God (see 1 Cor 1:18-30). Wisdom, because God alone is at work; and power, because Jesus is working to save us from otherwise being excluded from the Kingdom of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting in God Alone*

Because saving faith and God’s mercy are interdependent and do not exist apart from each other, Jesus is powerless among the unbelievers (v. 6); that is, powerless to save and to work miracles—things that are quintessentially beyond human ability not just now but always. Trusting in God alone, however, opens up an entirely new world of God-gifted possibilities, a

resurrected world as it were, unrestrained by our every-day struggles for power. In the here-and-now, this is the new kingdom-reality of “repentance” (v.12, changed-mind; see Rom 12:2) that Jesus and his disciples proclaimed, and it goes by many names, including: rebirth, change, renewal, forgiveness, resurrection, new creation, righteousness, sanctification, Kingdom of God, etc.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Proclaiming Christ Crucified and Risen Without Deeds of Power and without Weighing the Cost*

Both parts of this text (vv. 1-6, vv. 7-13) are directed towards Jesus’ disciples and would-be preachers not to get lost in their own power or in the persuasiveness of power, but to take hold of God’s promise of a new world being established here and now by faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen one. Such faith is the power of God—not to refashion the world by the strength of our own hands, but to save us and others from God’s final judgment. Being freed from the wrath to come, we find ourselves also freed from the judgments of those who judge according to what we do or fail to do. Therefore Jesus “ordered” his disciples not to take with them anything that smacks of self-reliance (vv. 8-10). For, by weighing the cost of discipleship, the cost will only weigh us down. Let anyone who hears, listen well! We are not called to build temples of wood and stone and glass to our God—as if God needed that to be our God, or as if others need to see what we have built in order to hear us out. Nor are we called to form like-minded groups that cater to our own desires for recognition or control over others—for, what good is that to others? Rather, as disciples and preachers of Christ crucified and risen, we will have renounced power to take up proclamation, becoming weak and often shameful in the eyes of the world by loving all others without weighing the cost. For us and for those whom God loves through us, love for its own sake is more than enough to

substantiate the Kingdom of God.