

Unearthing Gospel Gold—the Essay, Part II

Colleagues,

Here's the continuation of the essay that we launched you into [last week](#). It was delivered by the undersigned at last month's Crossings Seminar in Belleville, Illinois. As I write this, ill winds from the north have their icy claws on a major hunk of the U.S., including northeastern Ohio, the corner I'm tucked away in. A fanciful thought (though time was when it wasn't): might the Almighty be reminding a nation of the message that far too many tried dodging yesterday when they skipped Ash Wednesday services? If so, his final aim, as seen in Easter light, can only be to drive us all into the warm embrace of Christ. Whatever it takes...

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Unearthing Gospel Gold: Remarks on What It Is, and How to Find It *—continued*

Quickly, one final point or maybe two to tidy things up so far, and then, yes, we'll get to the good stuff; the really, really good stuff: the Gospel gold.

So first, let's look again at this matter that even theologians bridle at. It drives them crazy. They do their best to dance around it. The consequence of that is the gush of faux gospel that continues to this day to flood the church.

Most all of you, I think, are familiar with Isaiah 6, or at least the first part of it, where the prophet recounts how he was called. It ends with his stirring declaration, the key text for all too many ordination and commissioning sermons: "Here I am. Send me." "The Word of the Lord," says the preacher, having read that far, only the Lord's Word doesn't stop there. Now the prophet lays out what he's being sent to do, and it isn't at all nice. "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes...lest they turn and be healed." In other words, go, aggravate their sin, their core, essential sin, and make it worse.

Jesus echoes this in Mark 4, when he explains why he speaks in parables. Paul operates with the same idea in the opening section of 1st Corinthians, where he talks about God working deliberately to make smart people stupid.

Back in Exodus God hardens Pharaoh's heart. He makes him stubborn so God can flash God's glory as he pries his people out of slavery, at horrendous cost to the Egyptians.

I'm hard pressed to think of a single red-blooded American who would agree at the deep-down gut level that God has a right to operate this way. It doesn't sound good. It doesn't sound godly. I can hear it now, and so can you: "I can't and won't believe in a god who would carry on like this." Do golden children talk like this about their God? Not a chance.

And with that the truth is out in the open, exactly where God wants it, for all to see—or it would be if those theologians, those teachers of preachers, weren't stepping in to defend God's honor, as I suppose they see it.

So they teach that God can't really mean what God says, and they

teach that God would never be so cruel as to hand down a law we couldn't obey, and then they lay their hands on Jesus and turn him from Savior and Christ into something like a super coach who helps us do what's right. Along the way they dumb down his death into little more than a demonstration of how much God loves us, and if God so loves, then surely we can suck it up and do some loving too, first of God, and then the neighbor, and after a while the Almighty will see enough that glitters in our lives to order up a pair of golden slippers, our very own. I'm being facetious, of course, and grossly superficial. There isn't time to dig deeper, though if I did, it would only get worse.

It was worse in Galatia, where people were being told that you couldn't get to Jesus without signing on to Sinai first, not some of Sinai, but all of Sinai, circumcision included.

It was worse in the Latin Church of the dying Roman empire, where thieving sinners were being told that they were intrinsically good, and could be better if only they would try a wee bit harder.

It was worse in the late medieval papal church, where people were being told that if they were short on personal sparkle, they could buy some, through the church, from the treasure house of extra sparkle that all the really, really good people had generated in the course of their really good lives.

It is worse in the American church, where preachers on both sides of the blue/red divide will skip quickly past the crucified Jesus thing, not knowing quite what to do with it, I suppose, and will focus instead on self-help lectures, or on exhortations to save the unborn or defend the immigrant. Not that such things aren't important, but for sure they aren't Gospel. They do nothing to rescue thieves from their addiction to glitter, and they don't shield worthless, deluded wretches

from the wrath of a righteous God.

Speaking of which, does it startle some of you to hear me talking this way? That wouldn't surprise me. You don't hear "wrath of God" talk in American churches anymore, not even in Lutheran churches. That's why we're drowning, as people did in those prior centuries, in a tidal wave of gospel so-called. Good news that really isn't. Faux gospel. No one has the nerve to take the golden righteousness of God with the seriousness it requires. If they did might think for once to knock it off with their idle prattle and scout around for a person who's big enough to handle God for them.

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Now if you're looking for that person there's no better place to start than with St. Mark's account of the Gospel. As it happens, we'll be hearing from Mark on Sundays for much of the current church year. We got our first dose of him on the Second Sunday in Advent.

Here's how he started: The beginning of the *euaggelion* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This drives immediately into a quotation from Malachi, where God promises to send someone to clean up the worthless mess that masquerades as righteousness in the Jerusalem temple. Isn't that the very issue we've just been talking about? A lack of value? Fool's gold passing for the real thing? For which God's answer is this Jesus, this Christ, this Son of God.

Colloquial English has a splendid synonym for "Son of God." I've used it already, though in the plural, not the singular. How about this as a translation of Mark 1:1—"the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, *the Golden Child*." As we'll hear God say a mere eleven verses in, at the baptism, and in chapter 9 at the transfiguration, this is my Son, the Beloved, which is to say, the One I'm Really Stuck On. To which he adds, at the

Baptism, "with you I am well pleased," or you could say, "on you I dote." And at the transfiguration he adds, "listen to him!" Not to Moses. Not to Elijah. God help us, don't listen to the voices inside your own head, chattering away about how valuable you are. No, listen to him!"

Actions, as they say, speak louder than words, so let's listen for a little bit as the Golden Child swings into action. Notice first his fascination for wretches that you and I in our arrogance would brush aside as total dirt bags—no flecks, no specks, no glitter, no worth at all. Two of these bookend his pre-Jerusalem ministry, a raving nutcase in the Capernaum synagogue to get things rolling, and a pushy, obnoxious blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho as he wraps things up. When Jesus is done with them, both stand there looking and sounding like God's golden children ought to look and sound. For his part the beggar is tagging after Jesus as an example to everybody, disciples in particular, of what it means to follow him.

Between these episodes are similar ones, far more than we recount here. The leper at the end of chapter 1. The paralytic lowered down through the roof, chapter 2. The man with the withered hand, chapter 3. The foreigner infested with an army of demons, the bleeding woman, the dead girl, all in chapter 5. The crazy foreign lady's crazy daughter and the babbling deaf guy, chapter 7. Another blind guy, chapter 8. Another crazy kid, chapter 9. Every one of these people come away from their encounter with Jesus having been saved. That Mark's term for it, though translators often muddy this with alternatives, like "made well." I wish they'd quit doing that. "Made well" doesn't say nearly enough about what's just happened. Each of these people has been plucked up, in one way or another, from worthlessness—from being stuck in a corner to die because no one else can else can find the slightest speck of value in them; or in the case of Jairus's daughter, saved from being buried in the

grave that all dust bags are headed for. *But* when Jesus is done with them—notice, not a little “but” here, a big *alla* “but”—BUT when Jesus is done with them, they positively drip with value, each and every one.

And here’s an interesting detail, accentuated by Mark if not altogether peculiar to him. In case after case, Jesus’ interaction with these people, these dirt bag people, includes not only words, but also touch. Let’s think about that for a moment from two angles. First, would either of our two Christian friends, gone to the city to go about their business, consider touching that fellow who’s shaking the cup at them? I don’t think so. Yet that’s what Jesus does, the Christ, the Golden Child.

Second. You’ve all heard of the Midas touch. So here, Mark says, is the Jesus’ touch—a very different thing, of course. The Midas touch kills, the Jesus touch makes alive. In both cases it’s a golden touch, but then there’s old gold, and there’s new gold, the kind that befits a new creation, and new gold is that quality that makes the righteous Father’s eyes start dancing with joy. That’s what floods a dirt bag when the Golden Child touches her. I become a golden child when Jesus touches me.

Now that, I submit, is pure Gospel gold—a gift to celebrate, capital “C” and then to put to serious use. I think it’s time to quit dumbing down the Eucharist into a happy pseudo-meal that we all share as an expression of our mutual commitment to hospitality or whatever else it is that’s being touted today. Something far more profound is going on in this, the Lord’s Supper. Here the Golden Child swings into action. So he touches me, he touches you, he touches the spouse who divorced you three years ago, and the bitterness lingers; he touches the fellow on the other side of the aisle, seven pews back, whose attitude I do not like. As he does this his word and Spirit pushes us to

imagine and trust what God is seeing, how these flecky, specky people, dirt bags all, are being renewed before his eyes as his own golden children—pure gold, not fool's gold. Now there's a thought and a faith to take with you into the next Council meeting.

One other comment about the supper: the Eucharist is *not* for everybody, because not everybody wants Jesus touching them. This too is a key point in Mark's telling of the *euagglion*, and it leads into other key points. Some people keep their distance from Jesus, some walk away from him, some flat out oppose him. They see nothing of the Golden Child in this clown from Nazareth. Instead they see a thieving sinner—an egregious one at that. They see someone who keeps fingering God's gold, the rights that belong to God and no one else: the right to forgive sins, for example (Chapter 2) or to re-write Sabbath rules (chapter 3), and in the end when Jesus comes waltzing into the temple with whip in hand as if he owned the place, they make up their minds that this fellow, so obscenely full of himself, so obnoxious in his delusions of worth and place and grandeur, has simply got to go. So they set out in the name of God to strip him of his worth, whatever that may be, and now we find ourselves in St. Mark's passion, which, of the four, is easily the darkest. Bit by bit every speck and sparkle of value that we know as human creatures is stripped from Jesus: first liberty, then friends, then audience—those crowds that flocked to him the prior Sunday—then clothes, then skin and blood, and finally his life; and in the moment of his dying we hear him screaming at a black and empty sky, from which the Father's voice is missing—even God has turned away.

What Mark shows us in this account is the reduction of Jesus from Golden Child to Total Dirt bag—dust he has been, and to dust he now returns—only then the utter astonishment of Easter, in Mark the strange Easter that nobody talks about because

they're just too scared. Whoever would believe that a righteous God with any sense of dignity at all would raise so worthless a creature from the dead.

Saul turned Paul will believe it later, though only when the Golden Child accosts him; and after that no one will do better in describing what happened in the story that Mark relates. "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"—and no, not by earning it, but simply by trusting it.

Now is that Gospel gold, or what? Paul thinks so highly of it that he counts all else as loss and rubbish for the "surpassing value" of owning it (Philippians 3:7-9). Through him God invites the rest of us to do the same.

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So tomorrow all of us are going to practice digging for this stuff—this glorious enriching stuff—first in the pages of Holy Scripture, and then in the content of the lives we lead today as baptized human beings.

We're going to do that because Christ through his Spirit has strangely picked us to deliver the goods, some formally from a pulpit or a platform, as the case may be, and all of us, bar none, as we go about our days in a world where iron rules.

I mention ever so quickly that Christ has always made strange choices when it comes to his agents. This too is one of the main themes in Mark, even the central theme, perhaps; how Jesus picks dirt bags to follow him and after that is at enormous pains to get them understanding who he is and what he's doing. Now they see this Golden Child thing, but mostly they don't; and what they never get is why the Golden Child (if that's who he is) is on his way to Dirt Bag Central, known otherwise as Golgotha. In the end they simply scatter into the night, Peter bawling as he

goes, and they're back to the standard nonsense of trying to use an iron law to conjure some up some genuine worth for themselves. Like God will be impressed.

I'm all but certain that Mark wants us to see those disciples as a metaphor for the post-Easter baptized Christian, or in other words, for us.

He also wants us to understand that the Christ who refused to give up on them, is by no means ready to give up on us; and with the kind of patience that only a Golden Child would possess, he'll keep working, working, working, to get us to get it.

After that it's our turn to go apostolic on him. Our time together here is designed to help us do that well. God grant it. The world needs it. The church needs it, for that matter. It always has. It always will.

As we get ready for tomorrow's digging, there are two things I want to underscore with you and then I'm done. Both of these come to us as gifts from Luther and his colleagues who stumbled onto them in the course of their own great assault on the rubbish of faux gospel and fool's gold.

The first of these is the essential, critical insight that the Scriptures are not composed of one, uniform metal as people commonly assume. You know, it's the Bible, the Word of God, and all words of God are equal. So for devotions in the morning you can simply flip the Bible open, put your finger on a verse, then read it, believe it, and do it; after which, as Spock says, you will live long and prosper.

Are you kidding? Nothing you will lead you to fool's gold faster than that.

Instead, say our forebears, remember that you're dealing in the

Bible with two substances. One is iron. The other is gold. One controls thieves. The other creates genuine value. One weighs you down. The other cuts you loose. One goads you into trying to make something of yourself. The other shows you that God in Christ has made everything of you already, and is bound and determined to keep you that way.

Here's one of the important differences between these words. The iron separates. The gold unites. The iron forces us to notice differences between rich and poor, smart and silly, black and white, person going somewhere and person going nowhere, and then to treat these differences as things that matter to God as well. The iron tricks a baptized person who should know better into thinking that he is better and worth more, also in God's eyes, than the hopeless fellow with the tattered cup. By contrast, the gold draws us into the joy of finding equal value in each other, the high and holy worth of Christ. Not so long ago it moved a pope to kiss a beggar, to the astonishment of the world.

And a last big difference: the iron word is finally designed to mock sinners, to expose their thievery, and then to kill them. The golden word is finally designed to fill the age to come with golden children, all of whom, for now, are shining in the midst of a corrupt and perverse generation like stars in the world. That's Paul again, Philippians 2:15 (NRSV).

Both these words, the iron and the golden, are tremendously important. Both have their uses in the work God is doing in somebody like me. But they have got to be distinguished. If they aren't, the iron wins out, and the end result is either people preening over glitter, or people in despair that they are only dirt and dust, and with no hope of being more than that.

Next and final point: how do you spot the gold as you pore through the Scriptures, or listen to a sermon, or sit through a

conversation between fellow Christians for that matter? The best advice for that comes from Luther's colleague, Phillip Melanchthon, in the fourth article of his defense of the Augsburg Confession, commonly known as the Apology.

Tip #1: listen for the sound of promise. Gospel gold is always promising. It tells always and only of things God has done, is doing, or will do, the outcome of which for us is good, and only good. A recent theologian put it this way: you'll know it's Gospel if God is running the verbs, with you as the beneficiary. For example, "I will put my law within them, and write it on their hearts," Jeremiah 31:33. (By contrast, see the "you-do-it!" imperatives of Deuteronomy 4:6-8.)

Tip #2: apply a test. The teacher who put me and others onto this long ago called it the Double Dipstick test. Tonight I'm going to call it the double dirt bag test, small d, big D. First the small "d" test: Gospel gold is gospel gold when it eases the pain of someone who calls herself a dirt bag; when it invites her to believe in her worth—her real and genuine worth—in the sight of a righteous God. Melanchthon called this "comforting a troubled conscience."

Next, the big "D" test: Gospel gold is gospel gold when the one who gets the credit for it is the big "D" Dirt-bag-for-us, namely Jesus on the cross, stripped of his worth, and filling us with value. You know it's Gospel, said Melanchthon, when Christ gets the glory. But the moment you're claiming credit for yourself—and admiring yourself for having earned it—you're back to fiddling with fool's gold.

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With that I'm done, because the clock says I'm done, though what it really says is that I'm overdone. There is much, much more that I've thought to say, much, much more that I need to say, but the iron law of clocks forbids it—and I will count on you as

God's golden children to forgive me for leaving it unsaid.

Tomorrow is another day. God guide and bless the work we do together when the morning comes.