

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

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There is gold; and then there's fool's gold. There is Gospel; and then there's faux gospel. I wish I could take credit for that phrase, faux gospel, but I can't. I stole it from my Crossing colleague, Marcus Felde, who, with several others, plans to spend tomorrow helping you, among other things, to refine and calibrate your faux gospel detectors so that you won't be taken in by rubbish and can bless the people in your lives with the real thing instead.

And isn't that exactly why you're here, not for your own sake, but for the sake of the people God has filled your lives with to overflowing? Some of you call some of them parishioners; or you call them fellow members of the church I go to. Or you call them children, or friends, or co-workers, or neighbors. Or you call them the lady behind the counter at the corner store, or the kid who mows my lawn.

And let's by no means forget the ones you refer to as passersby, or strangers. That includes the jerk who cut you off on the freeway the other day, and the aromatic fellow who shook a tattered paper cup at you when you got downtown. "You crazy dirt

bag"—that's the thought, or something like it, that tripped across your mind when he did it. Being raised as you were, you kept your mouth shut and didn't say it, of course; but being born as you were, you sure enough did think it, and with the thought came a little flush of satisfaction, perhaps, that you, for one, were honest enough to admit that you were thinking it; and really why shouldn't you think it, what's the point in being less than blunt about these not so pleasant human specimens that all of us can't help but stumble over as we pick our daily paths through this broken, sinful world.

Add to this the thought that God the Holy Spirit might well appreciate this bluntness. Why shouldn't he, I ask. After all, it relieves him of the hassle of having to slice through a hide of false piety, than which few hides are more resistant to the two-edged sword the Spirit wields. That hide lies thickest on the baptized likes of us. We went to Sunday School. We've sat in church. We know the Lord's command to love your neighbor as yourself. We're well beyond the common folly that hears this as nothing more than a lovely sentiment, to be taken or left according to each one's discretion. No, we say. When the Lord says "love," the Lord means "love," and since loving that shaker of the tattered cup is not compatible with calling him a dirt bag, therefore I dare not, therefore I will not, therefore I do not; and if any should suggest that I so much as entertain such thoughts, I'll deny it to their faces. What a pain this must be for the Spirit, Holy and Righteous, as he reads the wrinkled nose, the slight flinch of the hand as I extend it toward the cup with a quarter or two, no more than that, I cannot know if the fellow will use it to buy another binge on Thunderbird or whatever other rotgut stuff the down-and-out are using to get drunk on these days. Far be it from me to abet his happiness in depravity.

"Gotcha," says the Spirit, who tells us also not to judge lest

we be judged—yet judging is what we do. We do it because we've got to do it, we cannot help but do it; reaching conclusions about the other, be these studied or snap, is as intrinsic to life in this world as breathing, or the steady pounding of a heart. All of you are doing it with me, right now, as I stand here talking, and you can rest assured that I'll return the favor later when I'm listening to you, in whatever venue that listening should happen. And for me there's again that glint of pleasure, the little thrill of satisfaction, in observing this; in taking the risk with all of you of pointing it out.

"You crazy dirt bag," says the Spirit, as he catches my thoughts—yours too, perhaps; though being the Spirit, he tends as a rule to say this more elegantly. For example, "all flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flowers of the field," etc. I mention this parenthetically for now, with the further observation, also in parentheses, that while human flesh glories in much, there is nothing it glories in more than its god-like status as a knower of good and evil. Behold the toddler asserting her right to decide whether Mommy, in pressing her to eat her carrots, is talking sense or spouting drivel; and if Mommy thinks the carrot fight is tough, wait till the tattoo question comes screaming through the door in a decade or so. In that day watch Mommy scratch her head in bewilderment as she wonders how somebody *she* formed, shaped, and raised could ever think to want a tattoo. Or to put this more precisely, what she wonders is how this child of hers could insist on finding worth where there is no worth, attaching value to something that serves in fact to devalue, as Dear Daughter, if she gets her way, is bound to discover in a few years time when she's out there trying to land the first real job, the one with semi-decent pay and benefits. Not that Mom gets anywhere by pointing this out now, not when Daughter glories so stubbornly in the divine right of the newly minted teen to know so very much

better than her elders ever have, or ever will.

Parenting, I sometimes think, was designed by God in part to force the bilious taste of his own consternation down our stubborn, willful throats. He formed us. He shaped us. He calls us his own. And not a day goes by when he doesn't catch each of us reveling in rubbish and turning up our snotty noses at things that he holds precious and dear.

And yes, this is true of us all. Again the episode we started with: two baptized sons of God Most High, gone down to the city to go about their business, are accosted by a beggar. The one is pious, the other is not. The one drops coins, the other brushes by. The one prays, "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other so-called Christians. I stop. I drop. I love my neighbor—I do, I do." And the other: "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other so-called Christians, so silly in their piety, so self-deluded. I know my faults, my limits. I tell it like it is, with eyes wide open."

And in so praying—I'm speaking here of fleeting prayer, the kind that skitters through the mind, all but unnoticed, though always caught by the One who catches every thought—in that praying, each man has an admiring eye on something inside him, something about him, that rivets his attention. Really, it isn't much—a speck of something, nothing more; but even so it glints. It gleams. It makes him happy. Spotting it, he feels the glow of a certain worth that other people lack.

Ah, the glow. Some of you drink whiskey; some do not. Those who do are familiar with the glow that not only warms, it addles the wits. This is that kind of glow. Before you know it, two people who have waded in the Word of God their whole lives long are being swept away in the primordial madness that expects Almighty God, Holy and Righteous, to take his cues from sinners. So as I

sneak a second glance at the glint that caught my eye, I expect God's eye to follow mine, and catch it too—that much it surely does, it always does. But more, I also expect that God will see the thing as I see it and name it as I name it; and in the name that I use to describe it—a spark of loving intention, if I'm the pietist, a flash of gruff courageous honesty, if I'm the other guy—in that name you'll hear everything you need to know about my own assessment of what I've found. It's a fleck—a grain or two, if nothing more—of glorious gold. God's kind of gold. We often call that gold by its other name: righteousness.

God likes this gold, of course. God seems in fact to have an insatiable thirst for it. He certainly demands it. Open to most any page in the Bible and you'll find him saying so. Listen to any preacher today who takes the Bible seriously and they'll say it too, as indeed they should—shame on them if they don't. Can you blame me, then, for being thrilled to have found this speck of it inside me, and after that for being eager that God should see it too?

“Not so fast,” says the Lord, using tones the mother mimics as she weighs in on the merits of the teen's tattoo. And again the Lord says, here leaning on his poet: “All that glitters is not gold.” After that the punch line, doing double duty as a punch in the gut—God's own words now: “Dust you are, and only dust, returning to dust: and to think you dared to think this little fleck of shiny whatever intermingled with the dust-you-are would somehow impress me,” says the Lord. “And you called him a crazy dirt bag?”

Really, what else is the Lord to say in this moment of our scenario as he watches a pair of his baptized agents refusing to extend anything approaching genuine love to their neighbor, the smelly beggar—will either try to engage the creature in any kind of conversation, let alone the kind that acknowledges him as a

fellow human being, are you kidding?—and still they find a way to preen as they walk away from their encounter with him.

Have they forgotten what they heard as recently as Christmas Eve, that God has a surprising fondness for uncouth, dirty, hopeless and going-absolutely-nowhere specimens of human garbage that nobody else can find the faintest scrap of value in? Seriously, one reason shepherds abided in the field is that city-dwellers couldn't abide them. But it's these to whom the angel comes, and of all the dead to be raised to life by the Word of God in the angel's mouth, they are the first. "Fear not. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord."

So tell me, who's worth what in that encounter on our downtown city street?

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Time to pause and get our bearings.

What you've heard from me so far is an example of the kind of analysis that Cathy Lessmann is going to walk you through at length tomorrow morning—not the whole analysis in this example so far, but only the first part. I'll leave Part Two for discussion later, if we get to it. For now I want to take you behind the curtain for a peek at the machinery, the set of fundamental assumptions that are driving the rest of what's spilling out of me tonight, and will gush from Cathy tomorrow.

I should mention, by the way, that Cathy's work with you will focus squarely on Scriptural texts, and how to read them. I've been zeroed in so far on reading a real- life situation, with bits and pieces of Scripture dancing in the background and egging me on. In doing that, I've put the cart ahead of the horse—do pardon the cliché, the third, I think, in about as many

sentences—and that's the chief reason for hitting the pause button (cliché #4) to examine why I'm thinking the way I am, and why I'm urging you to think that way too; and if it strikes you that my urging is intense tonight, wait till Cathy gets hold of you tomorrow—Cathy whose calling is not to preach, but to listen to preachers, which, over a lifetime, is also to suffer from preachers, too many of whom fail to deliver what Cathy will tell you she absolutely needs them to deliver, at least one nugget per sermon of pure Gospel gold.

Faux Gospel doesn't cut it. Faux Gospel at its best can be very attractive and full of yellow sparkle, but really, for all its prettiness, it's nothing more than a lump of iron that weighs you down and leaves you dead broke.

So my first and major task with you tonight is to define terms. Above all, what is Gospel, and what is not? I'm going to spend almost all my remaining time with you tonight on this, and we will dig deeply.

At the end, as a postscript of sorts, I'm going to pass along a couple of essential tools for reading the Bible. These come from Lutheran confessors of the 16th century, who realized that century upon century of shabby reading and poor interpretation had obscured the rich veins of Gospel God has put there for the benefit of dead broke sinners. So the first tool is a pickax of sorts, designed to break the gold loose from the material that surrounds it. The second is a touchstone, the tool one uses to test for the real thing—genuine Gospel as opposed to the faux versions that are still seducing eyes and hearts today.

So that's the outline for the next several minutes. Let's get to it, starting with that key word, "Gospel."

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Gospel means “good news.” You all know that. I wish there was a handy synonym for this, but there isn’t, and that’s too bad. In today’s English the word “Gospel” is opaque, and the phrase “good news” has gotten limp and weak through overuse. An imaginary newsflash of the sort we hear every day on the radio: “The Bureau for Consumer Awareness announced today that the cost of hamburger will increase next week to \$8 a pound, but the good news is that gas prices continue to slide.” Really, good news? Ho hum at best, I should think, and not good at all if I’m a serious fan of red meat.

I sometimes wonder if these everyday speech habits haven’t set us up to settle also in church for good news that really isn’t, and for gospel, little “g”, that’s as faux as faux can be. St. Paul would call these “other gospels”—not, he says, that there is another gospel, or in Paul’s first century people’s Greek, another *euaggelion*. That’s something good (*eu-*) delivered by an *angel*, a messenger. A good message, you might say. Or sharper still, a good announcement.

I assume the first century world, like ours, was awash in *euaggelia*, people popping up in the town square week by week to announce that the legions had clobbered the Parthians again in the latest kerfuffle out east, or that our own Pythias, the prefect’s son, had just won third place in the discus throw at the all- Macedonia tryouts for next year’s Olympic Games

Paul, by contrast, is extraordinarily stingy with *euaggelion* as a word. To know the story of his conversion—some of us heard it again in church this morning—is to understand why. There he is, face down in the dust of the Damascus highway, squirming as the shepherds squirmed in the dirt of their Bethlehem fields, only now it’s not an angel talking, it’s the risen Christ, the one who sits at God’s right hand as the Ultimate Judge, beyond whom there is absolutely no appeal, not even to the Father. “Saul,

Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And again, "I am Jesus," *ego eimi Iesous*, where *ego eimi*, "I am," is the God-name that Moses learned about at the burning bush, as Saul of Tarsus knows only too well. So he squirms again. What else can he do as he waits for the lightening bolt to split his spine wide open from neck to tail bone?

Only then the words—two words, I think, sometimes three in English—that must have stuck forever after in Paul's memory and been for him the touchstone of what is *euaggelion*, and what is not. Here's what Saul heard: "But get up." Greek has two words for the conjunction "but," a little but, *de*, and a big but, *alla*. This is the big but, the huge but, the great "*alla*" hinge on which the door to an unthinkably impossible future suddenly swings open. The voice of Christ: "Don't lie there as the worthless dirt bag you are and the mangled corpse you ought to be. *But* get up." Arise, if you will. "And getting up, start taking those first toddling steps into a new life, a sudden and astonishing existence of inexpressibly high quality and value, a golden Easter life, impervious to rust and rot and corruption and death, and it's yours as sheer gift. Not a speck of it have you earned. To the contrary. All you've managed to do is to dis-earn it. But, even so, get up. Get going. Enjoy your golden life and give it a righteous whirl. And that's exactly what Paul will do. God's word insists that he's still doing it.

Later on Paul will famously feature this great "*alla*" hinge in his letter to the Romans, 3:21: "*But* now, aside from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, the kind that makes its startling appearance through faith in Christ Jesus." We'll talk soon about how St. Mark in particular depicts this appearance. My point for the moment is simply that, where Paul is concerned, nothing short of a word this huge and magnificent can qualify for the term *euaggelion*. "Good news" doesn't cut it anymore as an adequate English equivalent. Nor does plain old

“gospel,” for that matter. So I propose—not that anyone anywhere will bother to listen—that we whose business it is to pass God’s *euaggelion* along to other English speakers today might do well to inflate our terminology the way you’ve heard me do it once so far this evening. Cathy doesn’t go to church on Sunday to hear “the Gospel”. She goes instead for that weekly nugget of pure Gospel gold. Let’s say it like that. Let’s make ourselves remember that she goes there for nothing less than the inexpressible gift of God that turns dirt bags into golden children. And so do you.

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Enter then the concept of golden children. Another term for these is “saints.” Paul uses this term in all but one of the letters he writes to churches. The exception is his letter to the Galatians. This shouldn’t surprise us. Nor should the tone that also sets the letter apart, both angry and anguished. The Galatians, after all, are trading in their Gospel gold for glitzy iron junk, a stupid move that succeeding waves of Christians have kept making in all the centuries since. I wish I could find a way to keep people in the congregation I serve, teenagers in particular, from drifting off to places that peddle this rubbish as a matter of course. If any of you have some clues about this, tell me later.

I need to say some more about this junk so we all understand what I’m talking about. Most of you, I’m sure, are guessing already, and guessing quite rightly.

The junk is the value that human beings, addicted from birth to notions of self- worth, are driven endlessly to accumulate for themselves. They measure that value in countless ways. Money is a biggie, of course. So is beauty, fame, and fitness. So is prowess—athletic, academic, entrepreneurial, the list goes on. I

think power is the most important thing we use to measure value by. That's in part because the person or party with power is able to jiggle the scales that measure what value is. They're also able to act in ways that either increase or decrease the value of others, as, for example, when Hitler sends his Wehrmacht into Poland, or when a boss promotes one employee and fires another.

In passing, when a person has built up value in whatever specie to an amount that *she* finds satisfying, she'll say of herself, "I'm all right." "All right" is the street English way of saying "righteous." God is never impressed when he hears people carrying on about their self-certified all-rightness. In fact he makes it a point to prove them all wrong, as the wealthy farmer found out in the parable Jesus told. "You fool," God says (Luke 12:20), and this of course is the same God who takes to laughing when the kings of the earth start strutting their stuff (Psalm 2:4).

Yet here's where it gets interesting in a painful sort way, so painful that even theologians—lots of them—refuse to face it. It's against these teachers, by the way, that Paul is squaring off in Galatians. Martin Luther will do the same in his day with the likes of Johannes Eck, and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Between them sits Augustine, contesting with Pelagius.

The point of painful interest is that God who mocks the value we accumulate has all along been pushing us to go for it. What's more, he's given us the structures we use to define value, and the mechanisms that build it up. The rich farmer is rich only because God has made his fields productive. The kings strut because God has filled their little fiefdoms with the wherewithal to pay an army. The mother crowing on Facebook about her righteous children is crowing only because she's been busy doing what God requires all mothers to do, caring for her

children, and loving them, and helping them to grow and prosper into Facebook-worthy children. To do such things is the law of motherhood, inscribed on every mother's heart, whether they want it there or not. Most do. Most take it simply for granted. The same is true for most every other person when it comes to the laws appropriate to them in their particular vocations, the worker that he should work, the employer that he should pay the worker, the student that she should study and get her papers done on time, said time defined by a professor who's busy obeying the law of professors to draw the best they can from their students in a timely fashion.

Beneath these laws lurk other laws, the general ones—ten by one reckoning, and by another two: love God; love your neighbor. That said, don't give your heart to lesser powers, don't do the core things that hurt your neighbor. All this too is etched in every human mind and heart, so deeply and thoroughly that I've never understood why we need to have fights about whether to post the Ten Commandments on courthouse lawns. Why bother? Show me the thief who, in your opinion, doesn't already know how wrong it is to steal. I'll prove otherwise. I'll prove it by stealing something from him. And when he yelps—or swings for my head, as the case may be—in that moment we'll see again how the law against stealing is, like all those other laws, embedded in the very operation of the world as we know it. It's not for nothing that the prophets call on us to name and honor it as the word of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. Not a golden word, but a word of iron, hard, tough, rigid, inescapable, designed expressly for the children of Adam and Eve who, from God's perspective, are anything but golden. "There is no one who is righteous, no not one." That's Paul, quoting Psalm 14 in his final descent to the great hinge moment of Romans 3. Riffing on that thought we might once again observe how every human being is born to be a thief, and the gold they have their fingers on

is God's gold, known otherwise, again, as God's righteousness, a quality— a privilege—that begins and ends with God's right to say what's right and what is not right. But the moment we touch that gold it turns to poisonous lead. "Their eyes were opened," as it says, "and they saw that they were naked." At which point, looking down, he asserted his right to admire what he saw, and then he heard her snicker because she, asserting her right, was finding him ridiculous. Later the toddler will kick about the carrots, and the silly girl will sneak away one night to get the tattoo, and as in the garden, so now in the house, so also in the whole wide world, there is misery, and there is wrath. That's what happens when sinners grab for golden rights that don't belong to them.

Iron is God's first response to this mess. Let's not despise iron. It isn't pretty, but it has its uses. From it you can build the structures that control the thieving multitudes and keep them from the instant ruin they'd come to otherwise. You can also fashion the instruments that restrict and punish when the thieving gets out of hand. Iron, God's iron, is the element that fortifies the agreements sinners reach about what is right and wrong for everybody. Without such agreements—cultural, legal, political—we wouldn't cooperate, and we simply couldn't live. Sinai is the story of God himself devising an iron-clad agreement—a covenant, as we like to say—to shape and govern life for a particular set of thieving sinners; though in the preamble to that he clarifies the iron principles—again, those Ten Commandments—that govern life for every group of thieving sinners. And when they flout these principles, back comes the iron, God's iron, this time as the essential component of things like swords and pistols and police cruisers, and the razor wire that surrounds the prison yard.

Here's the one thing God's iron doesn't do. It doesn't change the sinner. It doesn't drive the thieving impulse from my heart.

It doesn't kill my urge to grab the gold— God's right to say what's right—and to claim this as my own. If anything it exacerbates it. That's the point that Paul, Augustine, and Luther, each in their own time, are wrangling over with their opponents. The idea has ever been, and still is today, that if I do what God says is right, then—guess what—I'll have the right to insist that God admit this. Again, "I thank thee, Lord, that I'm not like other men. See? See? Such pretty speckles your iron law has produced in me. Aren't you happy? And if you aren't, what's wrong with you?" Of course this is ludicrous. It's the student checking in at the professor's office to demand an A+ on that altogether righteous paper that he, the student, just knows that he has written. If I'm the prof I think I respond to the fellow's cheek by cutting his grade from B to C-, and then I send him packing.

Or if I'm Jesus, I tell the fellow to go sell everything he has and give it to the poor—to divest himself, that is, of all his worth, his own worth—and then come follow me. Maybe then, and only then, you'll get somewhere.

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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." Here endeth the lesson, says the preacher, only the lesson doesn't end there. Now the prophet lays out what he's being sent to do, and it isn't nice. 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." 10 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 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 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 me 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 a new heart within you," Jeremiah 31.

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 credit— 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.

[UnearthingGospelGold \(PDF\)](#)