

“Safely Back in Mark”
2nd Sunday after Pentecost – June 3, 2018 – Mark 2:23-3:6/B

Today, we return to the Gospel of Mark – Reboot! We have to re-orient ourselves and our ears as we switch from John to Mark. And with this switch, we are starting The Story over again. We’ve done the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany cycle. We’ve walked the 40 days of Lent, through Holy Week to Easter. We celebrated for 50 days and then received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost...And now, we enter into the second half of the Church Year, the long, green, Season of Pentecost: where we learn about breathing in that Spirit and growing as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I just returned from my annual continuing education at the Festival of Homiletics – Preachers’ Camp for some 1700 preachers from across the US. This year we met in Washington, D.C. and our overall theme was Politics in Preaching. (Don’t worry – we made a very clear distinction between *Politics in Preaching* and *Preaching Politics*!) But to try to avoid the politics of Jesus’ time, we would not be able to read the Gospels in their context. We especially couldn’t read Mark! So, allow me to reorient you to the story told uniquely by Mark’s Gospel:

To start at the beginning, we meet Jesus as a grown man. We are only at the end of chapter 2, but Jesus has been busy. While there is no Christmas story in Mark (check it out,) he has already met up with John the Baptist and been baptized in the Jordan River, and confirmed as God’s Beloved Son by dove and voice vote. He’s been to the wilderness and back. And Herod has put John the Baptist in prison. So Jesus takes up the preaching mantle – and begins his own ministry.

First he begins gathering his disciples, and finds four of them who are fishermen at the Sea of Galilee. Here’s an obvious political comment: two of the fishermen are poor (Peter and Andrew) and two of them are rich (James and John.) The next place he goes is to the synagogue (gathering place) in Capernaum. He has been casting out unclean spirits and healing crowds of folks – lepers and the paralyzed – and casting out more demons than you can shake a stick at.

And then he really started ticking folks off: He calls a tax collector to follow. (Imagine Jesus filling his circle of friends with folks from the IRS!) Jesus has drawn attention to himself, for the authority of his teaching, and especially for his interpretation of the Law. Why, his disciples didn’t even fast, as John the Baptist’s disciples did, not to mention the followers of the Pharisees!

And that is where our stories begin today - with a perceived breach of the Law. Now Jesus and his followers have been elevated to a larger stage. Now the conflicts are becoming more clearly defined as two specific groups are watching him, waiting for their moment to pounce. The conflict started with those who held religious authority (the Pharisees) and then added into the mix those with the clout of political power (Herodians - Herod fans who wished to align themselves with the King of the Jews as long as Rome allowed him to remain King.)

Perhaps you can start to see why Jesus was offensive enough to crucify. When a new idea begins to take hold of the people, those who hold authority and power begin to fear the change. The human reaction to fear is to protect your position, to judge those who might actually accomplish a change. **Question:** how did Jesus’ ministry of restoration and care for all people threaten these powerful members of Jewish society? And, why would they even care about who God loved? **Answer:** Jesus would say they were afflicted with *hardness of heart*. We are familiar with hardness of heart because of the Old Testament story of Pharaoh vs. Moses. But the Hebrew Scriptures are offering just another way of saying *sin*. Hardness of heart is what Luther called *the heart turned in on itself*. Hardness of heart is why John the Baptist preached *Repent!* Hardness of

heart is how Mary rejoiced that *God was lifting up the lowly*. The Enemies of God are those who do not care about those God loves.

Pastor Ellen Richardson shares insight into the story's particular enemies: *Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians cared much about people... **Pharisees** reveled in righteous indignation at this itinerant preacher...blessing the ragtag army of the unclean who followed him around. **Herodians** merely capitalized on an opportunity to use one enemy (Jesus) to combat another (Rome). From Jesus, (who) cared about every sheep in the pasture, came exasperation in facing community leaders behaving badly – for **their hardness of heart was breaking his own.***

But what does keeping the Law have to do with a withered hand? Why would the author of Mark's story put these two images together? What intersection might there be between the rules and compassion? First, imagine a withered hand. It can do nothing, feel nothing. It renders its owner embarrassed, unemployable, unclean. It was the excuse they all used to exclude this man from his community, from worship, from daily work and thus, daily pay. So, in the midst of the struggle of interpreting the Law correctly, Jesus restored this man's hand, and with it his whole, full life. You might even say that Jesus **saved him**.

This is the Jesus of Mark – a different Jesus from Matthew or Luke or John. Is that confusing? Not really. Different expressions of Jesus allow **his heart** to reach across time and touch millions of **different** hearts in millions of **different** ways. And that's a good thing.

Because, don't we all have unique experiences and points of view? Aren't we all trying really hard to find the right mix and balance of our faith in Jesus and being involved in the politics of the world? Don't we all have things that frighten us, which make us defend our turf or protect ourselves? Things that harden our hearts?

Then, what of those with withered hands and lives who enter into our midst as we try to follow Jesus and not get caught in the world? Could they be the very presence of the Spirit, bringing us a chance to do God's work of love and restoration? When confronted with new challenges and change every day, we have the chance to ask ourselves, *whose agenda are we on? Are we here to do God's will, or something else? Amen.*

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RESOURCES: Ellen Richardson, Episcopal Church of the Advent, Williamston, NC/*Day 1*; Thomas G. Long, Professor Emeritus of Preaching, Candler School of Theology, Living by the Word May 3, 2018/*The Christian Century*; Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary/*Working Preacher*.