



ST. COLUMBA'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Finding Sacred Ground

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Washington, D.C.
June 13, 2021

Proper 6, Year B
Mark 4:26-34

Jesus was a criminal. Jesus was a criminal. The everliving Jesus, still in our midst, is a criminal.

The first three chapters of the Gospel of Mark are bonkers crazy. That's a technical term. Bonkers crazy.

In the first chapter he gets in a fight at a place of worship (1:23-26) and touches an unclean man (1:40-45). The common wisdom -- at the time -- was that touching a man like that would permanently remove one from polite society. A kind of social embarrassment that nothing could truly mitigate.

And, surely, Jesus did become unclean in the eyes of many, but Mark tells us that Jesus also healed that man. The power of Jesus is that even against the very powerful grain of popular sentiment, he took a marginalized person and healed -- or more literally -- restored him.

Don't worry, it gets much worse! In the next chapter, Jesus shares table fellowship with the most undesirable: an imperial money collector and the very poor (2:15-17). Jesus publicly reclines with them and calls the man who robs

the poor through tax collection to become one of his disciples. And later when the disciples break not custom but the very foundations of civil and religious law by harvesting gain on the Sabbath, Jesus declares himself outside the entire system of jurisprudence (2:23-27).

By the third chapter Jesus begins to commit crimes in public (3:5). In response Jesus' family abandons him (3:31; a rebuke without parallel in ancient Middle-Eastern culture). Also the local and centralized government begins to hunt him (3:6; 3:22) -- even in this very early stage of Jesus' ministry, they seek not his arrest but to execute him.

Jesus finishes the third chapter by, first, offering a parable that features himself as a robber breaking into the house of a "strong man" (3:27); and then, second, declaring patriarchy dead in the kingdom he means to inaugurate (3:35).

Hence my technical gloss, crazy bonkers.

All of this sets up Jesus' longest sermon in the Gospel of Mark. A sermon riddled with parables. Two of which we just heard: the

Kingdom of God as mustard seed (4:31-32) and the Kingdom of God as scattered seed (4:26-29). Jesus punctuates these parables by admonishing the crowds to carefully listen and hear him. Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (4:9; 4:23)! As if to say, "What I've done and said really is as radical as you think. Will you have the courage to believe it? Will you have the courage to live it?"



I just finished the 10 week Sacred Ground course with five other Columbans. I often thought that the sacred ground that that course invites us to, mirrors Jesus' invitation to listen and hear. To listen and hear the long but not ancient history of the marginalized and oppressed peoples of America.

Some of the material helped articulate and examine the implicit racial bias easily held by, for instance, us (!) -- the six white people circled around in our group. But also the course examined the complex and ongoing history of oppression in America by means of public policy. The course details racism not just as personal failing but as a legal institution woven into the fabric of our society from the very beginning.

I have in mind here not just the 3/5ths compromise in the US Constitution; but also, for instance, the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by Congress in 1882 which prevented immigration and naturalization on the basis of race; *and* the government enforced land reclamations of Mexican-American farmers in Texas in the 19th and early 20th century; *and* the National Housing Act of 1934 which ensured that the

Black community would largely not benefit from the explosion of wealth that happened in post-war America; *and* the forced assimilation of Native American children that has lead, even today in the state of Minnesota, for Native American children to be 20 times more likely to be in foster care than white children.

As Christians our allegiance is to the Kingdom of God, not to the defense of the empire -- even if the empire is the very land of our birth and filled with people we know and love. But what Sacred Ground has made clear to me is that if we are to be serious about our baptismal covenant to resist evil, to respect the dignity of every human being -- to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ -- then that will require the collective risk of our reputations on matters like public policy.

I can't help but feel that this puts us at a distance from Jesus. There were no conceptual tools for Jesus to imagine that some day the powerful might allow a system that gives (on paper) equal rights of determination to the rich and poor, the marginalized and elite. No way for him to imagine that all people might equally share in the construction and maintenance of civil authority. Jesus -- a man, in part, limited by time and history -- could not conceive of democracy.

And as a church it would be so much easier if we agreed to speak only in platitudes about our faith: to agree that the poor in heart and the meek are blessed -- and just leave it at that. To leave each of us to our own individual kingdoms.

I am a hundred feet out of my comfort and depth when I talk about fair housing. About the itch in my brain that senses a tension between

having a neighborhood full of Black Lives Matter signs and a neighborhood that seems reflexively against building “outside” developments near our own homes.

I am a hundred feet out of my comfort and depth in understanding the granular details in the For the People Act or the John Lewis Voting Act. Sure I have opinions about them -- which privately I’m happy to discuss and be challenged on. But talking about them as a church body -- as potentially a matter of our collective witness -- that makes me feel uncomfortable.

And yet it is by these means that the powerful have kept the marginalized from fulfilling the promise of our democracy and from a deep spiritual truth: that we are created equal in the eyes of God.

Though Jesus never considered what it would be like to witness in a democratic system the witness he did have is still our guide. Consider my summary from the first three chapters of Mark.

Jesus did not hesitate to make himself an embarrassment. Jesus’ first instinct was to take on estrangement for himself -- even to the point of criminality -- in sacrifice for the healing and restoration of others.

Above all Jesus knew that liberation -- liberation from political and religious oppression, from poverty and disease -- true liberation would always provoke conflict. Conflict with friends and family, but conflict especially from those whose privilege and status would be overturned by God’s new kingdom.

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And that brings us to today’s Gospel! The kingdom of God is like scattered seed. We are in charge of planting it, with utter abandon. Witnessing to it. Keeping the voice of Jesus -- his embarrassment and cross -- as our north star. How does it grow? What are the outcomes? How long must we travel in the desert of discomfort? That we do not know. All we know is that from faithfulness the harvest will come, one day.

The Kingdom of God is like a tree growing on the edge of a cliff. It is just as resilient as it is unlikely. It’s not something reasonable people would bet on. But it is that tree -- that unusual, misshapen shrub -- that will draw all creatures unto itself. When we are there -- all birds of the air, all creatures of the earth -- there in the shade of God’s uncompromising justice -- then we shall rest. Amen.