

biblestudy: march 2016

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

March 6, 2016 Text: Mark 9:14-29 “Powerful Faith”

Sometimes I just don’t get it. Maybe that is why I like the Gospel according to Saint Mark, because in this account of the ministry of Jesus, the evangelist writer shows just how often those closest to Jesus, the twelve disciples, just didn’t get it. When Jesus calms the waters of a troubled sea, the disciples can’t figure out who would have such power (Mark 4:41). Just before Jesus feeds the thousands, the disciples are figuring that they, not Jesus, will have to do the heavy lifting (Mark 6:37). Not long after that, Jesus walks on water and the disciples “were utterly astounded” (Mark 6:51). There is another occasion with a hungry crowd to feed and the disciples panic, wondering how food can show up in the desert (Mark 8:4). And in the verses just before this week’s study text, the disciples are terrified on the mount of transfiguration (Mark 9:6).

There is a strange comfort in recognizing, as Mark does, that the disciples did not always get the full significance of who Jesus is. In fact, by my quick and unscientific count, there are sixty-four question marks in the Gospel according to Saint Mark. Some of the inquiries are teaching tools of Jesus, but many of them are signs of the puzzlement that the disciples incurred as they journeyed with Jesus. When I wonder just how my life intersects with the gifts of Jesus, I am in the good company of the twelve.

In this report, the man who brought his son for healing has to admit that

he too falls short in understanding and he too falls short in full trust of the Lord. “If you can do anything...,” he pleads (Mark 9:22). “Help my lack of faith!” he cries (Mark 9:24). He comes to Jesus as we often do, not quite sure what the Lord can do and not quite full of trust that the Lord will provide. As the saying goes: “Been there. Done that.”

Going back to the beginning of this lesson (Mark 9:14), I notice the context for this healing: big arguments among the scribes, the legal experts, and some of the disciples. Is it possible that while we are busy arguing with one another and haranguing one another to make a point, our Lord is walking up, ready to heal, ready to bring new life, if only we’ll shut up and let Him be about His business?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Born of Conviction* (Oxford University Press), Joseph T. Reiff has said, “Throughout the church’s history, Christians have struggled to define their relationships to the dominant culture in which they live and to offer appropriate witness to their faith.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin, “Come, Lord Jesus, and bring the joy of Your presence and the hope of Your tomorrow. Forgive the sputtering places of my trust in You...”

March 13, 2016 Text: Mark 10:17-31 “Simple Faith”

When I read this week’s lesson, my first thought was how this incident challenges the prosperity gospel claim that God wants God’s children to be wealthy. Then also I hear an echo of the Magnificat, the song that burst from Mary’s lips as she shared news of the impending birth of Jesus: “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51b-53).

The incident is noted in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew simply calls the man “someone” (Matthew 19:16). Mark refers to the petitioner as “a man” (Mark 10:17). It is Luke who lets us know that the man was “a certain ruler” (Luke 18:18). That kicks the ante up a notch. This is not just someone who has considerable wealth; this is someone who also has a position of influence and power.

In some ways, the temptation to use our influence to our own benefit might be a more dangerous temptation than the possibility of our using our income selfishly. The truth is that most of us have more to spend in the way of influence than we do in the way of money.

Do you think you are without influence? Most of us remain blissfully unaware of how we affect others, how we shape the journey of others. What do I do to the clerk at Wal-Mart when I snap at her because

I had to stand in line so long? What do I do to the struggling youth when I tell him that I admire the way he keeps trying? What do I do to person whose language I do not understand when I smile as I try to communicate? What do I do to the old dementia-clad woman when I ignore her fifth telling of the same story?

Our wealth might not be in dollars. It could be in influence. It could be in relationships. It could be in humility. It could be in acts of service. It could be in intellect. It could be in free time. Whatever it is, it makes it hard to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:25).

The final word of Jesus to the man is the assertion that none of us is going to be saved by our own accomplishment: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). This turns out to be good news.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Roger Olson (*Counterfeit Christianity*, Abingdon) writes: “The gospel is not about physical health and financial prosperity; it is about God’s mercy, forgiveness, and inward transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Heal my wealth, gracious Lord...”

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March 20, 2016 Text: Mark 14:26-31, 66-72 “Struggling Faith”

This familiar text is one of the most dialogical, back-and-forth accounts to which we turn during these days of Lent. Think of it as “A” and “B” talking. (A) It begins with a hymn the disciples and Jesus sing together (Mark 14:26). (B) But the next thing to happen is Jesus telling the twelve that they are not going to stick together (Mark 14:27). (A) Then, our Lord talks of their getting together again in Galilee (Mark 14:28). (B) Peter pushes back and says he won’t be a deserter (Mark 14:29). (A) Jesus declares that Peter will indeed deny him three times (Mark 14:30). (B) Peter argues that he would be willing to die before he would deny the Lord (Mark 14:31). Reading these six verses is like watching a professional tennis match: back and forth, back and forth.

When the account resumes in Mark 14:66, the same kind of yes/no struggle continues. (A) The servant accuses Peter of being with Jesus (Mark 14:67). (B) Peter says that is nonsense (Mark 14:68). (A) She tells others she is sure that Peter is “one of them” (Mark 14:69). (B) Peter vows that he does not even know Jesus (Mark 14:71). (A) Peter remembers what Jesus had said about Peter’s denial (Mark 14:72). (B) Peter breaks down in self-recognition (Mark 14:72).

Isn’t this the way we often struggle with discipleship decisions? We set out to do what is morally good, but then put one toe into the waters of disobedience. We make a vow to support Christ’s Church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, but first one and then another of these promises falls aside....or, more likely, is

March 27, 2016 Text: Mark 16:1-8 “Ressurrection Faith”

There are words in this study text that we do not usually expect to find in Easter stories: alarmed, fled, terror, amazement, afraid. This is a far cry from our usual Easter mornings, filled with lilies and happy greetings. What’s wrong with these women (Mark 16:1)? Don’t they know how to celebrate Christ’s resurrection?

Perhaps it is we who have gotten too comfortable with the resurrection. When I opened my calendar on January 1, it already had the date for Easter 2016. Where is the surprise? Where is the amazement? Where is the shock?

Perhaps, deep down we do not believe that death has been overcome. Perhaps, deep down we do not accept new beginnings. Perhaps, deep down we do not think God’s purposes can overcome evil. Perhaps, deep down we do not agree that God’s reign is sure.

God invites us to be amazed that our sins are forgiven. God invites us to be shocked that there is life where we have thought there was death. God invites us to be alarmed that this Jesus whom we thought had been set aside is alive and wants us to walk with him even now. (This Jesus seems to walk in places and deal with people we had just as soon not have to bother with.)

How does one witness to the resurrection? In Mark’s account, there is a young man in a white robe (Mark 16:5-6) who tells the frightened

pushed aside. We start in a relationship with the best of intentions, but after our impatience or our self-centeredness, we hear the rooster crow that tells of our failure.

Here is one way we might begin to live fruitfully in this ongoing struggle with how to be a disciple of Jesus: when I make a commitment or renewal of a vow, let me ponder what it might look like if I were to break that commitment or to diminish that vow. Then, when I see evidence that I am indeed slipping toward disobedience—deserting Jesus---then I can weep and seek the forgiving, healing, recovering power of the Lord. Maybe it helps to know what our disobedience would look like. That might help us spot it and resist it.

What Someone Else Has Said: In *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Alfred A. Knopf), Charles Marsh has written, “Discipleship would evolve into a polemic against the...tendency to portray faith as a refuge from obedience...From the disciple’s first hearing of the call to his picking up his cross and following, his existence was properly one of concrete acts, of lived devotion.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Merciful Lord, here again I make my vow to follow. Let me hear the rooster crow when I begin to fail...”

women not to be alarmed. He tells them of the resurrection. The women themselves are instructed to spread the word (Mark 16:7), but in what many students of the New Testament believe to be the original ending for Mark, the women are too terrified to say anything (Mark 16:8). After all, who wants to look like a fool, babbling on about how this dead man is now alive?

But now, as I look around I do not see a young man in a white robe. I do not see three amazed women. What I see is my reflection in the computer screen. Surely I am not the one who is expected to speak of the resurrection; surely I am not the one who is expected to find the living Jesus so I can walk where he walks and be with the sort of people with whom he lingers. Surely I am not the one to express hope in a world filled with violence, hate, discord, and pain. If I am the one, I am alarmed, terrorized, amazed, afraid. It gives a whole new meaning to Easter joy!

What Someone Else Has Said:
Karl Barth (*The Faith of the Church*, Living Age) wrote: “(Jesus) himself showed he was victor, and his victory grounds our faith.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Alleluia! Alleluia!...”

Blessing Others With Easter Baskets - Stewardship Nuggets for Families and Children - by Janet Zimmerman*

"In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"(Acts 20:35)

Ask the children how they would feel if they did not receive an Easter basket on Easter morning. Most children would be very disappointed. Ask the children how they think children who do not normally receive baskets would feel if this Easter they received one. The children can be a part of making that happen!

This project can be adapted to people of any age. Choose a group and develop a list of items that the people would enjoy receiving. You can make this a churchwide project and ask for donations from the congregation. (Note: If you are working with a specific community organization, be sure to ask if there are items that should not be placed in the baskets for safety or health-related reasons.)

Questions for Discussion
In what ways were you blessed by participating in this project?
How is your life different from and/or similar to the lives of the recipients?
What are some specific ways you can keep these people in prayer? In what other ways can you help them?
What are your real needs as opposed to your wants?

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