

There is a famous saying by the Chinese philosopher (6th century BCE), Confucius, that goes like this:

“If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.

If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.

If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nations.

When there is order in the nations, there will be peace in the world.”

The stories I’ve selected from chapter 6 of Mark’s gospel seek to embellish this point. These stories come from the majority of the chapter; although you may have noticed I left a couple of them out. There’s a LOT going on here, and the lectionary jumps ahead to chapter 7 next week, so I decided to limit my focus; that is, what we can take away from the sending out and the receiving back of the disciples.

Jesus’ overall goal, is for folks to claim the Kingdom of God in their midst. Doing so, would accomplish what Confucius suggests: peace in the world. In Confucius’ wisdom, what is required to reach peace in the world, is a beginning point of righteousness in the heart. This is what Mark explores in this chapter.

In the opening story, which we did not read, Jesus has returned to his hometown, and is teaching in his home synagogue on the Sabbath. As people come to listen to his teaching, they observe who the “guest” teacher is, and they

realize it is their native son, Jesus. Then, as people will do, they began to talk. The more they spin tales about the Jesus they remembered, the less and less faith they have in his authority. It's a good excuse, right? I mean, there's no way that God was actually acting in *their* midst. So why not point to the flawed human being they thought they knew to promote their doubt? This attitude resulted in Jesus being astounded at their lack of faith, and in turn being mostly unable to do anything miraculous amongst them. So, he moved on to neighboring villages. This is an interesting take on the importance of having faith in order for the work of God to be accomplished! It is nice when we can be co-conspirators in revealing the Kingdom; and I'm guessing it makes God all the happier when we are willing participants.

So, Jesus and the Twelve move on. Jesus decides it is time to do some work in the laboratory that is the surrounding community. What's his hypothesis? The disciples have seen and believed enough in what he has shown and taught them that they are ready to participate in his work. So, he divides them up in pairs and sends them out with very simple instructions: "take nothing for the journey," but the clothes they have on their backs, a staff, and sandals. As our adult formation curriculum says,

Jesus expected them to rely on the hospitality of others, moving from household to household. Such hospitality was common in first-century Jewish society; welcoming a traveler into one's home, and feeding them well, was a sign of righteousness. Jesus puts the disciples into a uniquely dependent position: no bag, no extra food, and no money.

(Living the Word, Small Group Guide #2-22 p.1, Spirit and Truth Publishing)

The application of the hospitality rules will come back in our next major story when the disciples use their experience of vulnerability as a receiver of hospitality to inform their position of being required to provide hospitality. We will get to that point in a moment.

However, I also want to share with you what I read in theologian Ched Myers:

Rendered a “stranger at home,” Jesus is instructing his community to learn to be “at home among strangers.”

This message is a vital one for present-day church-goers. For so long, we have become comfortable with the model of church “as family.” EVERY faith community wants to claim this attribute as one of its assets, right? Our church is like a family. However, the caution seems to be made that some things happen when we get too comfortable with one another. Because we don’t want to hurt anybody’s feeling, we may want to protect one another, and not call one another into account - or even call into account our witness to the world. Also, the longer we dwell with one another, the more we see each other’s flaws, and we can allow those things to get under our skin. Church’s can also become insular and make it hard for, in Jesus’ words, “strangers” to find their way into “their” place in “the family.”

So, part of Jesus’ experiment is to see how comfortable his disciples are being strangers with strangers, and yet forming the human bond on giving and receiving of hospitality. Thus so, they can build relationships on openness and trust. Or, not. And if not welcomed, Jesus trained

them not to be offended. To simply, “shake the dust from their sandals,” put it behind them, and move on to another relationship. And NOT FORCE anything upon anyone. Again Ched Myers:

The suggestion is simple and clear. Where the gospel is received and embraced, disciples are to remain; where it is rejected, they are to move on (6:10f). This severs evangelism from any practice of domination or conquest. How different the history of the world would have been had Christian missionaries heeded these directives! (Myers, et al, *Say to this Mountain*, p72)

Ah, such a wonderful observation: How different the history of the world would have been had Christian missionaries learned the value of letting go of their need to dominate, and move on! It is also a good reminder to us, that not everyone will take hold of the call to balance one’s life by following the Way of Jesus. And it is not up to us to make them! We introduce our story of receiving the gospel, and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit - and to part ways nonjudgmentally and in peace. If there is righteousness in our hearts, then we have the capacity to love without coercion.

Our story is interrupted by that of the death of John the Baptizer. It is a horrible story of the capacity of those in power to do horrible things...even on a whim. It is interesting that this story is sandwiched between the disciples going out from, and coming back to, Jesus. It is a siren cry to any who commit to following John and Jesus; that one risks persecution by the powerful. All we

need to do is look at current events to see how dangerous it can be to speak truth about power...people can lose their jobs by doing so. In the case of John the Baptizer, it was his head. There is much more to be received from this text, however, for today's purposes I decided not to address it.

Immediately after the close of John's story, punctuated by the burial of his body, we return to the sending of Jesus' disciples. Indeed, up to this point, Jesus innermost circle have been known either as his disciples, or the Twelve. When they come back to him in verse 30, Mark designates them as "The apostles." This is the only time in the gospel where Mark uses this word for them. The greek noun *apostolos* comes from the root verb meaning "to send out." It is a not-so-subtle shift in Mark that a transition has been made by those who were "following and learning" (disciples) to those who were "out doing what they learned" (apostles).

Jesus, in a sign of hospitality and compassion, receives them. He recognizes that the experiment had gone well; they had been able to heal and anoint and cast out demons. He invites them to "come away, and rest awhile." Sounds nice. And it appears to be an invitation into the Way of Jesus being about balance: serving others, caring for self.

So, they get in a boat to sail to a deserted place. Mark tells us, however, that they are recognized. They are followed. People from towns around the lake keep an eye on them, waiting for them to disembark from the boat. And by the

time they do, there is a great crowd awaiting them. Now, had I been in that situation, I would have been really cranky. Anybody who knows me, knows that I need my downtime after being engaged with others for a while. I suspect the disciples were feeling this way. And maybe Jesus was, too, when he realized they wouldn't get their rest right away. That is, until he looked at the crowd - when he looked at the hunger in their eyes - maybe hunger for food (we'll get there in a moment). But, more so hunger for ... for ... for ... what? Mark describes it this way:

Jesus felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

If there is righteousness in the heart....

The people were lost. The people were aimless. The people were searching for something / someONE to give them meaning. This text points back to a passage in Numbers 27:15-17, when the people were in the midst of the Exodus; lost in the Wilderness of Zin...yes, "Zin," not "sin," although it's a pretty brilliant play on words! Moses, who had been prohibited from taking the people into the Promised Land, is advocating for God to appoint someone to get them there, lest they "be like sheep without a shepherd." God chose Joshua for that task.

The reference also points back to a saying by the prophet Ezekiel, who directly addresses those whom God gave the task of caring for the masses, but who instead ruled only for their own well-being:

Woe to you shepherds...shouldn't you be taking care of your flock?...You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, or treated the wounded;

you have not brought back the strayers, or sought the lost; but you have ruled them with harshness and brutality. They scattered because there was no shepherd.... (34:2-5)

Jesus sees that this is why the crowds keep meeting them everywhere they go. And, that they keep growing. Jesus is more than happy to take up the mantle. And so, seeing the people in light of their lostness, Jesus gave them his undivided attention and taught them ... presumably about the Kingdom of God being with them.

After some time, the Twelve, employing classic projection technique, tell Jesus that he should let the people go and find food for themselves, for surely **they** are hungry. Jesus, without even blinking, puts it back onto the disciples: "Give them something to eat yourselves," he tells them.

Remember earlier in the text when he sent the disciples out to be wholly dependent on others? Now the other shoe has dropped, and Jesus is wondering if they will be able to give the same type of hospitality as they received - except with seemingly fewer resources. They have between them, five loaves of bread and two fish. No WAY they have enough to feed that crowd...they tell him. That's when Jesus makes the great miracle. He starts by instructing the disciples to divide the people out in groups of "hundreds and fifties." Is Jesus already forming little faith communities? Family-groups created by whoever happened to be nearest to those individuals that day? Once again, creating community out of strangers.

Jesus then tells the disciples to share that bread, and those fish, and before they know it everyone has been fed with the magic number of 12 baskets leftover.

What happened?

I don't know? What happens when someone shows you a little generosity?

Does it make you want to feel generous too? I think so. I think it's possible that the disciples underestimated the generosity of the group. Jesus knew it was there. Or, they saw themselves as asset-poor, when, in fact, when they pooled their resources together, they were asset-rich. Mark's witness is that **5000 family-groups** ate that day!

Well golly, I wonder if this isn't a reflection of the Church? In Mark's time, as well as in our own? A) Generosity begets generosity. B) Sharing our resources amongst our groups of fifties and hundreds allows us to claim our fill as a whole, and then some. C) Jesus cares. Jesus brings us together (***strangers, no less!***) that we may tend for one another, and in so doing, open up the Kindom of God in our world, and in our time.

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What starts in that small place within, can spread when shared, and impact so many.

Where, my friends, and to whom is Jesus sending us?