

Mark 2

You Can't Contain This!

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I don't know about you, but this first full post-holiday work week about did me in. I got a heavy dose of reality and it was jarring. The good news is my 2020 planner finally arrived, so I am certain that once I have time to get all the things in the planner, now everything will seem manageable, right? Regardless, it is time to crush the new year!

This morning, having taken a detour from the narrative lectionary cycle (much like the detour I took from healthy eating habits) for Advent, Christmas, and the celebration of Epiphany, we begin our journey through the Gospel of Mark, which will take us through the seasons of Epiphany and Lent and right up to Easter. Because we took a detour, we are a little bit behind so, I am hoping we can pack a lot into today and catch up. The assigned reading for today is Mark 2. Before we plunge into it, since we will be studying Mark for quite a while, I want to say a little bit about the Gospel of Mark in general.

The Gospel of Mark was written before the other three gospels included in the New Testament. It was likely written during or soon after the Jewish war with Rome which began in 66 CE and reached its climax with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Around that time, because of the war, the fall of the temple, and the chaos that ensued, there were a number of people who stepped forward, claiming to be the Jewish Messiah, so it is likely the author wrote this book in order to reassert and interpret the claim, for Jesus' followers, that Jesus was the true Messiah. So, to be clear, the Gospel of Mark was not an eye witness account. It was written a full generation after Jesus' death, not as a history book, but for the purpose of teaching followers of Jesus, in that time and place, who Jesus was and what faithful discipleship was about.

Scholars do not agree on who the author of the Gospel of Mark was. Some think the author was an interpreter of Jesus' disciple, Peter. Some in that camp think the John Mark who is mentioned in Acts and possibly the Mark mentioned in a number of the epistles authored the text. Other scholars believe the book was written anonymously, like the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John, and that it wasn't attributed to Mark until the 2nd century. What scholars are certain about is that the authors of Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source for their gospels and

certainly, while the author of John may not have used Mark as a source, he was familiar with its content. So, in some respects, if you want to study the New Testament, starting with Mark makes sense.

So, let's do that!

Have you ever known someone who reads the ending of a book before they start the book? I had a college roommate who read romance novels that way. She wanted to be sure the book ended well before she invested her time in reading it. I've never been a romance novel reader, but I have to admit that, while in seminary, there were times I quickly skimmed assigned reading and then went right to the end, where the summary and conclusions were. We are covering a lot of ground today in Mark 1 and 2, so I thought it might be helpful to begin at the end of Mark 2, where we find a couple of Jesus' sayings that do a pretty good job of summing up the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

The sayings are Jesus' response to this question, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁹*Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.*

²⁰*The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.*

²¹*"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.*

²²*And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."*

These sayings, albeit a little puzzling, highlight one of the themes we will see repeatedly in the Gospel of Mark. It is the tension between the old and the new, the past and the future. The way we have always done things and the risky, uncharted path ahead. But, before we charge ahead, throwing out tradition and labeling all of the old ways bad, we should note that Jesus' sayings do not make a value judgment on fasting, the holey cloak, or the seasoned wineskin. According to Jesus, fasting at times is appropriate, the holey cloak should be repaired, just not with an improper patch. The seasoned wineskin should not be destroyed by putting new wine in it. The ritual of fasting and these "vintage objects" that

represent tradition have value, but they should not keep us from celebrating, from sewing new cloaks and making new wine, from being faithful to God's call to us now.

The last saying, about what happens to an old wine skin when it is filled with new wine, reminds me of a story about a man (not my husband) who decided it would be fun to learn how to brew beer. So, he read some books, bought some equipment, and brewed his first beer. He was super excited when it came time to taste it. He invited some friends over to share the auspicious occasion with him. They gathered at his house, had a toast to learning new things, and each one of them took a big swig of beer...only to find out it was really, really awful.

His friends suggested he pour it out and try again. The man was an old Nebraska farmer though. He wasn't the kind of person who threw things away. So, he kept it. For quite a while. He stored it in a closet off the laundry room. One afternoon, on an unseasonably warm spring day, he heard the sound of glass breaking, kind of a series of little explosions. He followed the persistent noise to the closet in the laundry room.

The beer bottles were, one after another, exploding and beer was everywhere. There was absolutely nothing he could do to make it stop. Like new wine in old wine skins and the physical reaction of extreme heat and carbon dioxide in a bottle, the kin-dom of God Jesus came to reveal will not be contained.

And it began, according to Mark, with the story of his baptism in which "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" In a foreshadowing of what was to come, we see that God would not be contained in some heaven (whatever your idea of heaven is) far away. The Spirit of God is here.

Following his baptism and forty days in the wilderness, Jesus' ministry began with calling his first disciples and traveling to Capernaum, a town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He taught in the synagogue there where he performed an exorcism. When he left the temple, Jesus went to Simon and Andrew's house where he healed Simon's sick mother-in-law. Word about the exorcism in the temple and healing of Simon's mother-in-law spread quickly. The ones who were sick and demon possessed were brought to Jesus who healed them and cast out

their demons. After that, he spent several days going from town to town throughout Galilee preaching, casting out demons, and even healing a leper by touching him.

But up until this point, while he was crossing boundaries and getting the attention of a lot of people, he wasn't in the cross hairs of religious authorities. That changed though, at the beginning of chapter 2.

This is Mark 2:1-12:

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹ "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." ¹² And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Jesus drew a crowd, such a crowd in fact, that these 4 devoted friends had no choice but to lower their friend down through the roof of the house where Jesus was. It was their faith in Jesus as a miracle worker that brought the man to Jesus. But it was not the act of healing that caused the tension between Jesus and religious authorities.

The problem began when he said to the man who was paralyzed, "Son, your sins are forgiven." "Who was he to speak for God?" the scribes wondered. It was this presumption of divine authority that generated this first bit of controversy. The scribes were a group associated with the Pharisees whose concern was preserving the Jewish faith and way of life in the midst of Roman occupation. They believed

that God had given the law as a means of carving out a sphere of holiness on earth. In fact, the very presence of God on earth depended on getting it right.

The priests were the ones who spoke for God. And when forgiveness was granted, it was connected to offering appropriate sacrifices at the temple. The boundaries the law prescribed, and the priests enforced, between sin and righteousness, clean and unclean, sacred time and space and profane, Jew and Gentile, between physical imperfection and wholeness---these could not be blurred without serious damage to the social and religious order. And, occupied as they were by the Romans at the time, maintaining order was paramount.

The thing the Pharisees were unable to see, was that God's concern for all of creation is why the laws existed in the first place. For the laws to be used to *cause* brokenness or to *keep people broken* would not do. For Jesus, it wasn't that tradition and the old ways were bad. It was that tradition had been co-opted by fear **and** it was time to gather God's people...all the people. Jesus came to say, "God is for everyone! So, a few things are going to have to change." It's quite sad really. Instead of rejoicing with the man who was healed, instead of being amazed or even curious, the scribes were cranky.

I wonder how often the Church is cranky in the face of what the Spirit of God is doing. Ironically, sometimes we are the ones setting limits and trying to contain God, as if that is possible. We do that in many ways, but I think we do it most often in two ways: by excluding people for a variety of reasons, often simply because they are not like us and by behaving as if we really don't believe the ways of Jesus work in this world.

First, the reality is, as inclusive as we try to be, there are people who are not here right now. Some aren't here because they just don't want to be. Some aren't here, though, because we have not invited them. How many of you are here today because you were invited? This is not a gathering of people who all believe the same things. This is a gathering of people who want the world to be different, safer, more just, peaceful. I bet you know people who aren't here, but who want those things too. Include them, invite them, we need them and maybe they need us.

And second, we, meaning Christians in general, say we want to live out the ways of Jesus. But, do we? Do we really believe those ways work in our world today or

do we think the world is too complex for God's ancient ways? Do you think peace can be a reality? I mean, can you even imagine a world in which guns and bombs and drones are not a thing? Can you imagine a world in which leaders sit down and talk to each other and work it out, knowing that is the only option? I can. The image of that kind of world is in my mind constantly. That world will only forever be a dream if we can't agree that the children in places like Iran are just as valuable as the children here. Do we believe that? If so, we need to make sure the people who represent us in Washington know that we don't want bombs dropped on their houses, schools, neighborhoods, markets, and parents. And while we are at it, we should tell them the children of immigrants and refugees are as important as our own too.

To be clear, people who follow the ways of Jesus do not celebrate when someone, anyone, is killed by a drone, even if they have done really awful things. People who follow Jesus do not support the incarceration of innocent children, even if we do not agree with their parents' choices. You must be so tired of hearing me say that. Believe me when I tell you, I am so very tired of it being relevant. Tweet or post this on FaceBook: The ways of Jesus work, we just have to work them.
#DCCReadsMark

Let's go back for a moment to the text because I want us to talk about the mat on which the man who was paralyzed was carried to Jesus. It seems like such an unimportant part of the story. But, for a small detail, it receives a lot of attention by the author. When Jesus was talking to the scribes, he said, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'" And then talking to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." Then the man, "...stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them..." The mat is, rather strangely, centered in the story. Doesn't it seem a little weird that Jesus told the man who was sick to be sure and take his mat with him? Why would a person who was healed need their sick bed?

Any thoughts? I guarantee there is not a right or wrong answer to this question. But, here's one explanation I've considered. We know that one of the ways in which Jesus was very comfortable sharing his message was through stories in which he used something listeners were familiar with to explain something

unfamiliar. Those are parables. Mats like the one the man was carried in on would have been very familiar to the crowd gathered around Jesus and to Mark's audience. That mat, in the hands of the man who was healed, could have been the spark for a great story that ended, "This mat that once carried me, is now carried by me, as I carry the good news of God."

What is your mat? What is it that you carry with you into the world to tell this good news that will not be and should not be contained, not even by the Church? What is the thing that makes you a follower of Jesus? For the man who was paralyzed, that empty mat was the thing that made him want to follow Jesus. Whatever it is for you...that's the thing you need to tell your family, friends, and neighbors about. That's the story of hope the world needs.

My metaphorical mat is a chalice and paten (that's the name for the plate that holds the communion bread). The chalice and paten help me tell the story of a man who taught us that eating with people who aren't like us is a good thing and that there is always room for one more around the table. That story and the privilege of inviting others into it has so impacted my heart and life that I can't help but tell people about it. What's your mat?

Whatever it is, pick it up and use it tell the world the good news that will not be contained. Amen.