

January 12, 2020

Mark 2:1-22

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Book of Mark is most likely the first of the four gospel books to be written, sometime in the late 60s CE. In this season of Epiphany (from Christmas to Lent) we read through the first half of the gospel which focuses around the question of the identity of Jesus. Starting in Chapter 8 the story moves to one of conflict between Jesus and the forces aligned against him.

Today's section is about quarrels, community, and conflict between the religious leaders and Jesus. They seem to be rooted in what we first heard in Mark 1:22, 27-28 about how "the people were astounded at the teaching of Jesus, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Here too the crowds lift up Jesus as an authority without equal 2:12.

If the Gospel is God's victory over the forces that diminish life, today's passage contains a countertack by the religious leaders structured by the question of **WHY?**

We can ask whose faith is seen by Jesus in v 5 the paralytic or his friends?

THEIR HEARTS Today we think of the mind as the center of our will, feelings & thoughts. In the Ancient World they thought it was the heart that was the center of the will.

the Son of Man This is an evocative title from a vision in Daniel 7 used for the One who would come to judge the world.

But so that you may know - We can hear in verse 10 an echo of God's explanation of the plagues in Egypt "For this time I will send all my plagues upon you yourself, and upon your officials, and upon your people, *so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.*" Exodus 9:14.

TAX COLLECTORS were despised because they collaborated with the occupying Gentile Roman forces who gave them the power to collect Roman tax monies and then add whatever they wanted to skim off the top to use to line their own pockets. They were unclean, unrighteous like the other common people unclean as per the law and thus **SINNERS**

¹ When [Jesus] 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!"

¹³ Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴ As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵ And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many **TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS** were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "**WHY** does he eat with **TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS**?" ¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;

I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

¹⁸ Now John’s disciples and *the Pharisees* were fasting; and people came and said to him, “**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.”

²³ One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, **WHY** are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵ And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷ Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

¹ Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴ Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What word, phrase or image grabs your attention?
- Who and how is Jesus presented in this section of quarrels, community and conflict?
- For Jesus, healing seems to be connected to forgiveness. How are they related?
- We’ve seen that God in Jesus is victorious, the gentle healer and the renewer of our breath of life. Here Jesus is all about transformation. But of who?; and how?
- How do you hear an invitation from the Spirit of God to speak, be, act or become in this word?

the Pharisees were members of the religious group closest to the teaching of Jesus. Yet here (and often) Jesus satirizes them as they claim to have achieved “righteousness” by living separate from sin in all they do. They fasted twice a week, an act that may have been intended to hasten the coming Day of God.

The wedding guests cannot fast In Jewish law wedding guests were freed from certain religious obligations that were deemed to be incompatible with the joy of the occasion.

the bridegroom along with **new wine** are used as metaphors in the First Testament to refer to the Messianic Age to come, when God would make all things new.

When Jesus talks of **that day** he seems to be referring to the judgment that Amos describes using that metaphor in Amos 8:9-14 “⁹ On **that day**, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.

¹⁰ I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. ¹¹ The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord....”

The Bible Makes Sense

Jesus' Ministry

From his birth narratives, which are indeed about the witness (Emmanuel) and for-ness of God, we may better understand the ministry of Jesus, for his ministry is doing what is announced in his birth. His ministry is the focus of the Gospel, especially Mathew, Mark, and Luke. They are interested primarily not in who he is but in what he does. Who Jesus is is known only from what he does. And what he does is to be with us and act for us. He brings power to people whose power is faint and low. He brings food to people desperately hunger. He brings healing where diseases seemed to rule. He brings life where death was all they could anticipate. Jesus had no magical power. He was rather the central way in which god showed who he was, the rich man who "for your sakes ... became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9), the full one who for our sake became empty (Philippians 2:6-11), the living one who faithfully laid down his life (John 10:11). To be with another may be only an act of momentary condescending charity. Bu to be for another means to be vulnerable in the situation of another, to suffer with and die for, to be subjected to the conditions and risks of another, to have one's person called into questions like that of the other (see Romans 5:8). That is God's good news, unlike the goodness of any other God (see Psalm 82). God shows who God is by the capacity to enter into the suffering of others, to be with, to be identified totally with them and not to be helpless there but still for the other with fresh power. No wonder this is a peculiar God, like whom there is no other!

The Gospel of Mark has a "messianic secret." That is, every time somebody discerns who Jesus is, he requires that it be kept a secret. Perhaps it is a secret to this early congregation because in the empire it is too dangerous. (It is still to dangerous to let it be known in our urban 21st century world. More likely it is a secret because Jesus is a strange riddle that violates our reason. He is at the same time the utterly powerful one and the totally powerless one.

Jesus is the strange presence of God whose powerlessness is powerful. The totally vulnerable one is the present ruling Lord. It's is such a strange idea. It calls us to completely change our notions of God's presence to us.

Questions for Reflection

What would it mean if you would believe God is for us? For you? Can God take sides? Would it matter?