

The Gospel of Mark and Congregational Transformation

GO! BE THE CHURCH "Mission Evangelization as a Strategy for Congregational Transformation"

Week Four: Acts of a Disciple
Text: Mark 7-10

Day One Read Mark 7

From Belief to Faith and Faith to Action

When Christians put their faith into action, the hungry are fed, the homeless find shelter, and the lonely experience love. When disciples live with Christ at the center of their lives, the oppressed are set free, sinners realize salvation, and the demoralized recover dignity. The blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk.

We can list our heroes of the faith who have given everything they were or are to being disciples of Jesus Christ – people like Francis of Assisi, Theresa of Avila, Patrick of Ireland, John Wesley, Francis Asbury, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Gustavo Parajón, Arnulfo Romero, María Cristina Gómez, and so on. But there are thousands upon thousands of unknown disciples who have changed their world by putting their faith into action.

We are disciples of Jesus Christ and are called to follow him, embody his ministry and live his example. When we do this, lives are changed. The Gospel of Luke tells of the time when Jesus returned home to the town in which he grew up – Nazareth. On a Sabbath day he went to the synagogue as per his custom. He was asked to read from the Hebrew Scriptures. He read a passage from Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lords favor."
(Isaiah 61: 1-2a; & Luke 4:18-19).

Once he had finished he sat down, assuming what was then the accepted position of a teacher. As people settled in to listen to him, Jesus shocked the assembly by declaring he was the one of whom Isaiah was speaking – he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Needless to say, this caused quite a stir and the hometown folk rejected the very notion of Joseph's son growing up to be the Messiah. In fact, they were prepared to execute him on the spot for such a heresy. However, from this side of the cross, we know Jesus to be the Messiah, and we know that he is the one we are to follow. But who is... and what does it mean to be... a disciple of Jesus Christ?

We serve a Scandalous Savior

All through his ministry he made scandalous statements that would cause any good Jew to stand, tear his clothing, and cover himself in ash. God's grace is available to all humankind? NO WAY! The Jews are the chosen people – they are a covenant people – they are the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No one else! Gentiles were not included in the covenant God made with Abraham. But Jesus continued to insist that God's grace is available to all humanity. Yes, they were, indeed, a chosen people, but chosen to point the way to God. They were chosen to show the entire world the majesty, power, grace, and love of God. Jesus provoked his hearers many times throughout his ministry by insisting that the salvation of God was for everyone – not just the Jewish nation.

Read Mark 7:1-13

Jesus is teaching in an undisclosed location. He is surrounded by Pharisees and scribes (experts in the interpretation of Jewish Law). They observe disapprovingly how Jesus' disciples do not observe the rituals for washing before handling food. When Jesus is asked by the religious leaders why his disciples do not practice the rituals, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13:

This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition (Mark 7:6b-8)

The NRSV translation of the same text is reads:

The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote...

Jesus turns the tables on the religious leaders by quoting their most respected prophet. What is the purpose of rituals when their hearts are unchanged? In effect, Jesus is rebuking the religious leaders for "rejecting the commandment of God," the intent of the Law, in order to keep their tradition. Thus Jesus' disciples are allowed not to practice the cleansing rituals, because they have no meaning in the Kingdom of God.

What the non-Christian world expects disciples to consider important is not quite what disciples do consider important. The world expects the church to be about right acting, right thinking, and right feeling. That's why we get so much criticism about being hypocrites. Being human, we don't always act, think, or feel right. But Christianity is not a simple system of morality, politeness, self-esteem, affirmation of individual worth, and assurance that everything will work out in the long run. Christianity is a conversion of all of life that

focuses on a relationship with the living Christ. Christ directs our paths and leads to life-transforming discipleship. Even the non-Christian world can tell the difference between what is authentic discipleship and what is tradition for tradition's sake.

In Russia, during the 70+ years of Communist rule, many beautiful churches and cathedrals survived. Many of them, however, survived as museums and were used to show the world how Soviet Communism really did provide for freedom of religion. Church museums were kept open, while congregations in mission faced oppression and elimination.

If we were suddenly faced with the rule of a dictator opposed to Christianity, would your church survive as a museum or face elimination as an example of authentic, life-changing discipleship?

Day Two

Read Mark 8

We Recycle Rubbish

Re-read Mark 7:31-37. As Jesus returns to Israel, he passes through the territory of the Decapolis, or Ten Towns – a land of the gentiles. Some people bring him a man who is deaf and almost completely dumb. Moved with compassion, Jesus takes the man aside, puts his fingers in the man's ears, then spits and touches his tongue. The man is restored to health.

He can hear and speak and he is astounded and deeply grateful. As the man is healed, Jesus forbids him and others to talk about this event. Again, why? Is Jesus protecting the man from the crowd? Is he drawing attention away from himself as a healer so that God's Kingdom may be the focus of his ministry? The man and the witnesses to the healing disobey Jesus' request and spread the news throughout the land of the gentiles. The reaction to Jesus' acts of mercy is astonishment. *"He has done everything well..."*

Or take the story of the healing of the blind man in 8:22-26. Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethsaida on the western shore of Lake Galilee, the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. Once again, the close friends of a blind man confront Jesus. They beg him to heal the man. Like the deaf man in 7:31-37, Jesus moves him away from the crowd. The method of healing is also similar. Jesus applies saliva to his eyes and lays hands on him. Immediately, the man sees people that look like walking trees. Things are still fuzzy. Then Jesus lays hands on him again and this time his sight is restored completely and he sees clearly. And like the deaf man, Jesus commands him to go home, do not return to the village, and tell no one. But he cannot be still. The restoration of his sight is an overwhelming experience. Not to tell is impossible – it is such fantastic news. Once he was confined to the life of a beggar. Now he can begin to have a normal life. Keep still? Not when you have such wonderful news to share.

Many, if not all, of the healing Jesus did released people not only from disease and disability, but also from isolation and condemnation. Disciples of Jesus Christ, following Christ's example, are known for rescuing those condemned by a callous society to isolation and loneliness. Those labeled as outcasts, weak, or misfits are reduced to rubbish. Christian disciples recycle "rubbish". They rescue, restore, and redeem

the "least of these," whom Jesus regards as his own presence. (See Matthew 25).

Christ's followers have left their mark on the world with altruistic acts of "agape" or selfless, God-like love. In the first century when Christian disciples were persecuted by Rome, they left Jerusalem and scattered throughout the known world. Within a generation, Christianity reached as far as India to the east and Spain to the west and to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire. Ministries to the "least of these" emerged as the natural outgrowth of faith. Later on Christian contemplative communities living in monasteries founded universities, hospitals, hospices, orphanages, and shelters for women and elderly. History is filled with stories of congregations, Christian agencies, and individual disciples responding to a Call to serve Christ by serving others.

Share from your own experience a time when you participated in or witnessed a ministry that grew out of a willingness to serve "the least, the last, and the lost" as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Day Three

The Kingdom of God and Jesus' Great Reversals

Re-read Mark 8:27-38. While on their way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples who it is that people are

saying his is. So they told him that some believed him to be John the Baptist or Elijah or some other prophet. But it seemed that Jesus was far more interested to hear who THEY believed him to be. Peter spoke up – you are the Christ!

Then he began to teach them, telling them that he had to suffer much, that he would be rejected by the religious establishment, and ultimately be killed. The good news, though, is that he would rise again after only three days. Peter was not at all pleased with these predictions. “Don’t talk that way, Jesus! There is no way that that is going to happen!” All of a sudden, Jesus whips around and looks straight at Peter and calls him Satan because he obviously was not thinking like a disciple. He could only see things through the finite mind of a human being. Understanding the ways of God was beyond him at that moment. He only wanted to ensure the safety of the one he loved and followed.

He then calls together a crowd of people along with his disciples and begins to teach a series of realities so opposite of what people would consider Truth. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it. What doth it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and then loses his soul?

The disciple’s true self or life is found in the life of the resurrected Jesus. Without Jesus, one’s life is lost. Saving one’s life means saving the ego, and all the things that one collects – whether that be tangible goods or intangibles like a love of tradition or a good reputation. All will be lost – including one’s life – without Christ. The disciple must make a choice. And no one can make it for him or her.

And, by the way, this is true for congregations, as well. The church that seeks to save its life will lose it. When a church feels as if it is in decline – finances are tight, worship attendance is shrinking, the building is aging – the tendency is to pull in, spend all of its resources (financially, emotionally, spiritually, physically) on saving its institutional life. There is not enough of anything to share with a hurting and lost world and that world is no longer important to such a church. All they can think of is how to survive. You can expect that church to die. But the church that loses its life for Christ will save it. To turn around, a declining congregation must focus on the gospel, their relationship with Christ, their call as Christians to spread the Good News and reach out with compassion to hurting people, no matter the sacrifice. THAT will be the church that saves its life.

When was a time when you had a great need and you ran out of options except turning to God? What did you do? What happened?

Day Four
Read Mark 9

Another Great Reversal

The matter of self-importance in the Kingdom of God returns in 9:33-37. The disciples are jockeying for positions of power. James and John approach Jesus privately and ask that Jesus do whatever they ask him to. They ask him to be placed in positions of power and influence in the new kingdom – John in

one seat of honor to his right and James seated in the other seat of honor to his left. Jesus speaks in Kingdom of God language. He tells the brothers that they do not know what they are asking, or rather, that the weight of responsibility may be too great for them to handle. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" Self-assuredly, they answer, "We are able."

When the other disciples hear that James and John are acting like opportunists, they become angry. So Jesus calls them all together to teach them a bit more about Kingdom living. Reminding his followers how the Gentiles lord it over them, (a veiled reference to the oppressive Romans), Jesus shares God's way of understanding leadership. Greatness is defined by an attitude and acts of humility and servanthood. In order to be greatest, one is to be slave of all. In order to be first, one must be last. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve others.

To many the teachings of Jesus make absolutely no sense at all – especially the "great reversals". The first shall be last? Those who would be greatest must be servant of all? Does that make sense?

We give intellectual ascent to these teaching. However, do we actually apply them in our Christian living? Can you name examples when you have lived out any of these reversals? How about your congregation: have you initiated ministries that live out these reversals?

Re-read Mark 9:2-13 and 14-20. This is the story of the Transfiguration and the healing of the epileptic boy and it is an incredible example of the power and compassion of Christ.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John, his closest disciples, to a high mountain. Scholars refer to Mount Tabor, ten miles southwest of Lake Galilee as the possible site. There Jesus is "*transfigured*" or transformed before them. His clothes became a dazzling white! And standing on either side of him are Moses and Elijah – the two men that represent the two most powerful and significant influences on Hebrew life: The Law (Moses was given the Law by God on Mt. Sinai) and the Prophets (Elijah, a reformer, was taken into Heaven on a chariot of fire and was to return just prior to the arrival of the Messiah. John the Baptist was an Elijah-like figure.)

While they are atop the mountain, a cloud covers them, and the voice of God declares His relationship with Jesus, His beloved Son. Then comes the command, *listen to him!*" Just as suddenly as the event began, it was over and Jesus was left alone, returned to his normal self. It was a glorious witness to the divine nature of Jesus, the Christ and the 3 disciples were utterly amazed at what they had just witnessed.

Then Jesus, Peter, James and John come down the mountain to be reunited with the rest of his disciples. He finds a crowd in complete disarray. Several people, knowing him to be a healer, run to greet him and solicit his help. There are scribes arguing with the 9 disciples that stayed behind. When he asks what the argument is about, the father of an epileptic boy responds by addressing him as "Rabbi", stating that his disciples were not able to heal the boy.

Jesus reacts with frustration because of the apparent lack of faith his disciples exhibit. "*You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring (the boy) to me.*" Jesus responds as a parent

would to wayward children. How many times must Jesus teach the presence of the Kingdom of God? And yet, his closest disciples don't get it and, therefore, are unable to act on faith and heal the boy.

Jesus turns his attention to the father who gives him more information on the boy's history of seizures. The father says, "*but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.*" Jesus ministers to the father's soul, by responding, "*... All things can be done for the one who believes.*" The father responds with, "*I believe. Help my unbelief!*"

Jesus sees a growing crowd running towards them, and he works quickly to heal the boy, before they are surrounded. Jesus commands the spirit to leave the boy, to *never enter him again!*" The boy's body convulses, the spirit cries out and leaves him for dead. Jesus took the boy by the hand and helped him stand. The Christ of the Transfiguration took the hand of a young boy, healed him, and helped him to his feet.

How is this a perfect example of Jesus' great reversals?

When have you experienced Greatness reaching down as a servant?

Day Five Read Mark 10

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Consider Mark 10:17-31. A man runs to Jesus and kneels before him. "...Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good? Only God is good.," corrects Jesus. Most likely all rabbis would have responded the same way in Jesus' day. Being addressed as a good rabbi would direct too much attention toward the teacher and not toward God. In answer to his question, Jesus runs through the familiar list of good works found in the Ten Commandments. Encouraged, the man responds that he has kept these since he was a boy. Jesus loves him and his heart is warmed, but there is one thing this young man was missing. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me." Hoping that he could discover one more thing that would clench it for him, he was taken by surprise by the price of this commitment.

From the outside, we can surmise that the rich young man was not satisfied with his life, even if he had been a good person and had scrupulously followed the Law of Moses. He instinctually knew there was more to life than all his wealth and goodness. Yet, he could not bring himself to do what Jesus required of him. He was "*shocked and went away grieving*" for he knew that he could not give up his wealth and his influence. He could not give up control of his life, for his wealth controlled him.

Jesus interprets this event to his disciples, declaring twice, *How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!* The choice between caring for wealth and

caring for the things of God is a very difficult choice. The disciples do not understand Jesus' response to this rich young man. In the popular religion of the day, it is assumed that if one is wealthy it is because God has given them wealth as a blessing and a reward for right living. Of course, it was believed that the opposite was also true: if one is poor, it is because God has willed it so because of their sin, or their parent's sin. Jesus tells a parable, which is often misunderstood. It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples were disturbed at such a teaching, because it went against what they had been taught in their traditional faith.

Who can be saved then, ask the disciples. Jesus' response is witheringly simple. He looked at them and then said that persons cannot save themselves – they cannot get themselves into the Kingdom. That is impossible. Only with God is it possible. With God all things are possible. The wealthy man thought he could save himself with wealth, power and influence. No wonder he was disappointed when Jesus told him to give it all up and follow him.

When I (Larry Rankin) have encountered the powerful faith of poor people in seemingly hopeless situations, I wonder how they can do it, and I marvel at the "signs and wonders" I have witnessed among them. When I am back home, I rarely see it. My current conclusion is that when people are devoid of physical wealth, there are fewer barriers to God. Dependency on God for all things seems total, and thus the miracles are revealed. Perhaps our dependency on wealth shields us from "seeing" God and God's marvelous works.

What do you believe you need to be or do in order to be a fully devoted disciple of Jesus Christ?

Jesus predicts his death and resurrection

Mark 8:27-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34

In each of these passages, Jesus teaches on the fate of the Son of Man. It is inevitable that he will undergo suffering and death, and after three days, rise again. (We already dealt with 8:27-33 on Day 3) Peter rebukes Jesus, because he believes that Jesus isn't following the traditional script for the Messiah. "No, Jesus. You are going to ride into Jerusalem as a new and great king, greater, even, than King David. You are going to be a conquering hero and free Israel from her oppressors. It says so in the scriptures. Jesus rebukes Peter calling him, "Satan" - an opponent and accuser who will be an obstacle to Jesus and God's plan for the salvation of the human race as long as he continues to think that way.

Jesus and his disciples move through Galilee. He wanted his movements to be private. He wanted to spend as much time with his disciples as possible before he dies. Then in 9:30-32 for the second time, he shares with them the outcome of his earthly ministry. He outlines the events in the same way. The Son of Man will be handed over to the authorities; they will kill him; three days later, he will be "*raised up.*" Again, the disciples did not understand, because the prediction did not fit what they had been taught.

Finally, for the third time, Jesus predicts what is to happen to him after they arrive in Jerusalem. Tension is in the air, as members of his group respond to what might happen. Some are filled with wonder. Others are afraid. Taking the twelve aside, he reminds them what is to happen. This time, Jesus describes what is to happen to him in greater detail. He will be judged by the Jewish leaders and then tortured by the Gentile

leaders. The first two predictions were followed by an indication that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying. This time, however, there is no comment. Is reality starting to dawn on them? Salvation costs something. Discipleship costs something. Do the disciples get it this time?

Why would Jesus resign himself to such a difficult outcome? Why would the “world” see this as foolish?

Being an authentic disciple is full of risk and draws controversy. Do you recall when your congregation decided not to do an action for fear of causing controversy? What would have been the consequences if the action had been taken? Consider new actions and the rewards to be reaped in spite of the risks and controversies.

So many of our educational methods assume that knowing the “facts” about Jesus or discipleship will serve you well – that stored knowledge implies great wisdom. However, Jesus states in his teachings, that belief is more than knowing something – you must live it. Give examples in your life and in the life of your congregation where faith was put into action and it made a real difference.