

The Gospel of Mark and Congregational Transformation

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

Week Five:
The Transforming Power of the Good News
Text: Mark 11-13

Day One
Read Mark 11

Without This, the Others Won't Work for Long

Every Christian is responsible for getting his or her spiritual house in order. A congregation is responsible for building the "infrastructure" over which people may travel on their spiritual journeys, but it is still the responsibility of each disciple to get in the car, turn the key, and drive. A congregation may be responsible for making sure each new Christian is nourished and nurtured – fed, if you will. But the goal is to grow to the point where, as a disciple, a Christian can feed him or herself. Ultimately, our spiritual growth is between God and each disciple.

We "walk the talk." Talking about a religious life without following up with action is worthless. Actions are hollow, unless under girded by the profound guidance of the spiritual life (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Humankind is created in the "imago dei," the image of God. We are spiritual and physical beings. From birth to death, we are on a spiritual quest to "know" God. Acknowledging his own quest, St. Augustine stated in his Confessions, "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." This is why Paul appealed to the Roman church to put first things first:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" Romans 12:1-2.

Conform to the Trends of This World

It is the most natural thing to do what is the most comfortable and the least disruptive. We avoid conflict, controversy and change. And yet the cosmologists show us that the universe, the very creation of God, is in constant flux. From the beginning to this day, the universe continues to expand, even as new stars and planets are born and the old stars implode or explode and pass away.

List as many examples as you can of the ways God has built change into this world.

However, Paul was not talking about healthy change that leads to new life and growth. Conforming to this world means that we acquiesce to the trends that come along without considering their consequences in our lives and in our Christian testimony. That is why the writer of Ephesians admonishes the church in Ephesus not to be influenced by

every spiritual fad that comes down the pike (Eph. 4:14-16). We are living sacrifices, witnessing to the power and presence of Jesus Christ in all that we are and do.

Discuss a time when you or someone you know became a “living sacrifice”, witnessing to the power and presence of Jesus Christ in word and/or deed.

Day Two

The Fig Tree and Conforming to This World

Let's consider Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the cursing of the fig tree for not producing fruit, and at the cleansing of the Temple. In Mark 11:1 the King has come to his capital city. Jesus does not slip into the city unannounced and unnoticed. He is intentional in communicating his presence. The reason for this is linked to the disturbing little story of the condemning of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple.

First of all, it is important to recognize 5 distinct groups of players in the drama of the Triumphal Entry. First, there is a crowd of people who have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah according to their tradition. In their hands they wave branches (in John they are palm branches – a symbol of military victory). Palms are stamped on their coins. By waving the palm branches, they are, in essence, proclaiming Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah in his role as the great King and General who is to come in the likeness of King David. And by

waving the palm branches, they are, in essence, thumbing their nose at their oppressors – Rome.

Another group of players is the Pharisees and other religious leaders. Their primary concerns are two-fold: this rowdy crowd waving palms and declaring a military victory COULD get the nation of Judah in serious trouble and they are charged with the task of keeping the people in line, thus avoiding a bloody massacre. However, they are also concerned that Jesus is a fraud. A third group is made up of soldiers charged with the task of keeping the peace during the Holy Season of Passover when Jerusalem is temporarily populated with religious pilgrims from all over Judea. They are like UN peacekeeping troops.

The fourth group of players in this drama is the disciples – men delighted for all to know that they were with the “big guy”. For them, like for the crowd, this is a joyous moment. But WE need to see this moment less like a happy parade (a post-Easter perspective) and more like a very controlled riot. In the center of the throng is Jesus riding on a donkey and by riding in on a donkey, he is telling the people something. The donkey is as much a symbol as it is a means of transportation. When a general rode into a conquered city, he rode in on a large, white steed – a horse. However, when a general wished to convey that he had come in peace, he rode in on a donkey. So, misunderstood, Jesus rides into Jerusalem surrounded by an intense crowd of people – supporters and non-supporters – many of whom expect that by the following day, he and the angels in Heaven would set Judea free from their Roman oppressors. They are willing to take up the sword to follow Jesus on to victory. Others are scheming ways to convince the crowd that Jesus is nothing but a charlatan and will let them down.

Now, with the Triumphal Entry in mind and all of the players in place, let's look at the story of the fig tree. Mark again folds one story inside two parts of another, telling the beginning (Mark 11:12-14) and end (Mark 11:20-25) of the incident of the fig tree bracketing the cleansing of the temple. All three events combine to announce IT'S TIME! The kingdom of God is no longer a hope. It is, in other words, here and now. Jesus has brought his campaign to the heart of the nation. More than that, however, Jesus has come to claim, as David did before him, the capital city from which he will reign. But how he claims it will be totally unexpected.

As for the condemning of the fig tree, it is a disturbing story unless you see it as an acted parable. The fig tree is Israel. The nation of Israel was God's idea, and not because the Jews somehow deserved to be God's chosen people. As with God's choice of the Church, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." (1 Cor.1:27) God chose the Jews as a "light to the nations," to clearly show that the work of redemption was God's work and not the work of a holy nation.

Mark's gospel was written just before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in 70AD. Mark could see the handwriting on the wall. As Jesus had cursed the fig tree and taken away its possibility of ever bearing fruit again, so Israel was being chastened for their disobedience and God using alternate means to inaugurate his Kingdom. This was no arbitrary decision. Ever since the rebellion in the desert following the flight from Egypt, God had been patient for centuries with Israel. Time and again God had confronted the nation with its sin, punished them, and then restored them for the sake of God's dream of a kingdom to come.

In what ways is the fig tree like the nation of Israel?

With the cursing of the fig tree, what was Jesus trying to say?

In what ways do you think the Church today is like the fig tree and like the nation of Israel? In what ways do you think the Church is different?

In what ways do you think YOUR Church is like the fig tree and like the nation of Israel? In what ways do you think YOUR Church is different?

Day Three

As in everyone's life, there always comes a time when it is time! A time, in other words, when time runs out. So it was,

2000 years ago in the ancient city of Jerusalem. IT WAS TIME! The cleansing of the temple is part of this drama, and may well be the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” The temple with its worship obviously represented the heartbeat of Jewish life and religion, as Christian worship does for the church. Following the acted parable of the fig tree there is now God’s judgment on Israel itself. In the so-called cleansing of the temple, Jesus did not just drive out the moneychangers. How many of us have used this story to condemn money changing hands in church? Actually Jesus did not object to money changing hands, or even sacrificial animals being sold. What he objected to was where this was happening. The point of Jesus’ complaint is that it is taking place in the Court of the Gentiles! This place was set aside as a place of prayer for “foreigners who join themselves to the Lord (Isaiah 56:7). It was being misused by the Jews for trade and profit.

I remember a lovely little chapel, in a church complex, that had become a storeroom for tables and chairs. When I asked about it, my host said they needed storage space more than they needed prayer! I was there that week for a revival! I wondered if perhaps God hadn’t already abandoned the place.

IT WAS TIME! There was no time for repentance and new beginning. There was no time to wait on the fig tree to bear fruit. There was no time to wait on the keepers of the temple to decide to get their act together, clean up the Court of the Gentiles and make it ready for newcomers. God’s offer of transformation had come. God’s kingdom had come! God had given them 2000 years. The urgency of God’s Kingdom superceded all else.

The so-called “mainline” church or traditional denominations in American need to take warning. God will not abandon God’s plan. As this scripture so disturbingly illustrates, God will

chasten an unfaithful people or church and choose another to convey his truth and grace.

Respond to the final paragraph of Day Three’s lesson and discuss it with your group.

What does an unfaithful people or church look like?

Day Four
Read Mark 12

Transform -- to change, metanoia

Jesus Christ is our change-agent. He redeems and restores us. Daily we die to ourselves as we are born again in Christ (Rom. 14:7-8; 1 Cor. 15:31). John Wesley’s theology of grace hinges on the notion that as God’s image, you and I reflect that image as a mirror to the world in order to redeem it. According to Wesley, through God’s grace, we become co-participants in the redemption and creation of the world. How great is God’s confidence in us!

- **The Works of Piety**

Over 250 years ago, the Wesley brothers organized the Holy Club at Oxford University and encouraged its members to be accountable to one another. They prayed, led in Bible study, and met for Christian conferencing or conversation. The corresponding action was mission ministry. The disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and meditation were examples of works of piety. To be pious, meant that one was to be holy, or separated for the performance of special acts for God and humanity.

- **The Works of Mercy**

The Holy Club used their meager resources, time, and talents, as an expression of their faith. They visited the physically and mentally ill. They prayed with the condemned and accompanied them to the gallows. As the Methodist revival took root, new mission institutions were founded and funded with “apportionments” from the societies. Sunday Schools, orphanages, women’s shelters, health clinics, and senior homes were established as an outgrowth of the works of piety. They uttered the prophetic call to eliminate slavery and alcohol abuse. John Wesley took seriously James’ admonition, *“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead (James 2:26).”*

The genius of the Methodist Revival was the intentional balance in the faith and practice of the Gospel. The laity were encouraged and trained for ministry through evangelization and mission. Wesley knew that this balance for the individual Christian and the church must be maintained, if the mission was to succeed.

Re-read Mark 12:37b-40. Jesus had a warning for religious leaders (clergy or lay) who appear pious but

their works are inconsistent with their words. What is that warning?

Give a modern day rendering of whom and what Jesus spoke against.

“Which commandment is first of all?”

There are times when it’s important to get things absolutely right. **(Re-read Mark 12:28-34).** God was doing a new thing. Therefore the question was very appropriate. Which commandment of the 613 commandments in the Torah is first of all? As the church lives toward God’s dream of a kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, what is absolutely essential for living as a Christian community? Love God, says Jesus, and love your neighbor as yourself. As for the man who asked the question of Jesus, he is not far, says the Lord, from the kingdom of God. Neither are we far from fulfilling God’s dream when we love God and our neighbor first of all. Living into these commandments will transform our lives as well as the lives of those to whom we show love.

Although the question does not occur in Mark’s gospel, but in Luke’s, the question “who is our neighbor” is appropriate to ask. He or she is not necessarily the one who lives next door,

but the one who needs us. Who needs you? Let us say it as clearly as it can be said. In this new “kairos” time the unchurched are our neighbors. Too many of us are living with no care or compassion for those who are lost. Too many of us are ready to leave the unchurched to the judgment of God rather than bring light to them. Too many of us declare our belief in Christ as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” and we say we believe that no one comes to the Father except through Christ. But we never act on that belief. If we really believe what we say we believe, would we not want to do all we could to bring people to Christ? Yet many of us do or say nothing to the unchurched about Christ. We are quick to recommend books, restaurants, doctors, movies, medication, schools, etc. but are uncomfortable recommending a relationship with Jesus. If our churches are churches for only church people, are we any different than the Israel from whom God turned away?

The difference between belief and unbelief in relation to Jesus and the kingdom has now become clearer because of this episode, and the ones preceding it in this section. It is about love – love for God and love for our lost neighbors. It is about a love, which involves soul, mind, and strength. It is about Jesus and the transformation, which he offers.

The delightful story of the widow’s offering illustrates just how radical this transformation is. Obviously Jesus was sitting where he could see what people were putting in to the offering plates. Some gave much – much more than this widow. The difference was that she gave everything she had to give. She held nothing back. The others, who gave much more, only gave of their excess. In this “kairos” time, the issue is, can we get by with token giving of our treasure and ourselves? It is folly to think that God’s kingdom will come with our part-time, half-hearted efforts. The time is now! God’s transforming power is at hand. Let the church lose its life for Christ’s sake.

What does it mean to you to give all you have to give and hold nothing back for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

Day Five
Read Mark 13

Teaching about the end of the age

Mark 13 is familiarly known as “the little apocalypse.” It is a treasure house of teaching about the time Mark’s readers were living through and perhaps the time we are also living through. It is a time of social disruption. The Roman army has descended upon Israel. Before long the precious temple will be in ruins. We know something about ruins of late as well.

Jesus feels a sense of urgency as his time is running out. The manner of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem leaves no doubt, but that Jesus knew that “his time had come.” Everything Jesus does early in Holy Week is calculated to invite the nation to believe in him and his mission. They choose not to! It is always chilling to realize that religious people were in the forefront of the ranks of Jesus’ enemies. You can image the Roman authorities set against him and even the politicians. But Jesus’ enemies were able to win the day because of the support of the religious community. The Pharisees were the most committed of all of Israel’s citizens.

This whole chapter can be seen in terms of Jesus’ instruction to his disciples to not let their guard down. He is also specific about what they should guard against. They should, for

instance, guard against undue trust in the trappings of religion. The disciples, like all Jews of the first century, were proud of the temple. “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings?” (13:1) “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” answers Jesus. Nothing human beings build is indestructible; only what God builds can be trusted to last.

They were also warned against trusting religious leaders just because they were religious leaders. They are not to trust everyone who claims to be the Messiah. (5-13). Sometimes in the church those who are appointed to lead are not those whom God anoints to lead! Be alert, we are told. Be alert and be discerning is the message of Mark 13.

In all times, however, witness to the transforming power of God through Jesus Christ is essential and required of those who will be faithful. In all times we are to trust God to use us so long as we are totally surrendered. “When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”

Remember the references to the difference between “chronos” and “kairos” times? “Chronos” time is business as usual, normal time, time measured as we know usually experience it. “Kairos” time is critical time, special time, time measured as God knows it. Many commentators believe we are living in a special time. Some believe it is the End Time; others that history has conspired to create a special window of receptivity to the Gospel in our time. Whatever the cause, this is not a time for casual commitment, or for procrastination. “This is the DAY which the Lord has made.” “Now is the time of salvation.”

As this is being written a missionary held hostage in the Philippines has been killed. He was there with his wife to offer

Christ. In a rescue attempt, his wife escaped but he did not. His family, back home in Kansas made a statement to the press in which they shared their grief in the death of their son and brother. “But,” they said, “We still trust and rejoice in the Lord.”

What is your reaction to their faith?

This chapter does not hold out great encouragement for “triumphalism” or for “prosperity” versions of Christianity. The descriptions send chills up our spine. The “urgency” of the Kingdom of God supercedes all else: be ready – there are no excuses. We should remember that something of what Jesus is describing has happened and is happening to Christians today. Persecutions, false teachers, and natural disasters are not elements of some future age. They happen now. Any serious understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus must take account of these possibilities occurring in our walk with the Lord. We are not immune from any of this.

Yet the situation is not hopeless. Our calling as Christians is to be faithful by staying alert. There are no “quick fixes” for the world. There are no charismatic leaders who will solve the world’s problems without struggle and suffering. To be on our guard and to be faithful in all things is the most impressive testimony to the transforming power of the gospel that there is. What we are called to do is to follow Jesus, to take up our cross and follow him day by day. Through faith we know that God will raise us to new life in Christ Jesus. As we die to all to

which he died, we shall live to all to which he rose! In the meantime, stay alert and to God be the glory!

Jesus expects us to produce even in times when it is hard to do so. What does that mean for you?

Where is God in your work as a disciple?

The task before the church today is to be apostolic in its focus on Christ and in its outreach to the lost. That outreach will need to take notice of changes that the church must enact to win a hearing from contemporary people and alleviate suffering for those in need. What kind of changes does your congregation need to make to attract our contemporary people.

What kind of changes does your congregation need to make in order to reach those in need?