



Texts in Context

The Way of the Cross: Markan Texts for Late Pentecost

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THE TASK OF THE CHURCH IS TO MAKE DISCIPLES OF THE UNCHURCHED. SOME might add we must make disciples of the church as well. Learning what it is to be a follower of Jesus involves more than attending Sunday worship. Many Christians know that. Their lives have been shaped since childhood by a variety of family and community rituals that have made disciples of them. Grace at meals, prayers before bed, listening to Bible stories, getting together as an extended family after Sunday worship for a long, relaxed meal, singing hymns in the evening, setting aside Wednesday evenings for church activities, memorizing the catechism as one of the rites of passage during junior high school, church suppers—all these have helped to shape generations of believers into disciples. The problem is that there are far fewer such believers in churches today. Many church members were not raised in congregations; they have not known older generations of saints; familiar hymns that have shaped the imagination of believers are to them unfamiliar. That means that the Christian life must be more self-consciously held up for examination, and new rituals developed by which people who have had no real background within the church can become disciples.

These five lessons in the Pentecost season provide a helpful occasion to reflect on aspects of discipleship. All the lessons come from a portion of Mark's Gospel dedicated to the issue of following Jesus. The section that might be titled "The Way of the Cross" is rather clearly defined in the Gospel. It is "bracketed" by two stories

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about the healing of blind men (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). The section is introduced by Jesus' question, "Who do people say that I am?" and concludes with Jesus' statement that "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

The specific instructions about discipleship and the stories that offer some glimpse of what it will entail to follow Jesus are closely tied to central christological images. The whole section begins with the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ, followed by Jesus' prediction that he must die—one of the great passages in the Gospel and surely one of the major turning points in the story of Jesus' ministry. It is precisely at this point that the particulars of following Jesus are explored. Mark's Gospel is not like Matthew's or Luke's; it does not contain major blocks of instructional material. There are glimpses, however, of what it means to "take up your cross and follow me." The Gospel lessons speak of status, children, divorce, and wealth. The topics are sensitive and Jesus' words demanding. In them we hear the voice of the law. Such passages may prove uncomfortable for preachers, but those who hear these lessons read at worship will recognize their importance, and their questions will demand some attention. These particular issues, further, are among the most significant for the health of the Christian community.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 8:27-35 (Peter's Confession)

These verses are immensely rich and may well generate a variety of agendas for interpreters. One is christological. For the first time in the Gospel, Jesus is identified as the Christ. Readers have known since the opening verse that Jesus is "Christ," but the term has not yet been used in the story. Neither God, disciples, or demons speak of Jesus as "the Christ" until this point. He is "Son" and "Son of God," as God and the demons tell us. Others have their own estimates. The scribes from Jerusalem think Jesus is possessed; his family thinks him out of his mind (3:20-21). The common people are more enthusiastic. They believe Jesus to be a prophet—whether John the Baptist, Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6), or "one of the prophets" (perhaps Deut 18:16-20). Preachers might explore the various titles and their significance.

Likewise significant is the relationship between Peter's confession and Jesus' announcement of his impending death. While "the Messiah" refers to a royal figure from the line of David, whom the scriptures promise will arise to save Israel, Jesus predicts that he will be rejected, killed, and raised. The two "plots" do not fit. No one expected the anointed king to die. Peter reacts as any Jew would react—with offense. Jesus' rebuke of Peter as "Satan" may be taken figuratively (Peter is playing the role of Satan in trying to dissuade Jesus from his appointed task) or more literally: Peter knows the truth only because he is "possessed." It is not yet a saving truth, as we shall learn; the same Peter will deny Jesus. How the confession of Jesus as Messiah becomes life-giving and productive is one of the major questions that runs through the story.

Most significant, I would suggest, is the link between the christological affirmation and the first instructions about discipleship. While Jesus is a healer and

teacher, to follow will mean first and foremost something about his cross. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). To be a "Christian" means to be involved with Jesus' cross. But what does that mean? The most immediate suggestion is martyrdom. "Those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake and the gospel's will save them" (8:35). For most of us, however, martyrdom is a slim prospect. And in the Gospel story, the cross that awaits the disciples is of a different order.

Some tend to think of suffering as a project the faithful must undertake. But how is it with the disciples? They do not voluntarily bear their cross in the story. They fight it at every step. They seek to save their lives, not lose them. They experience death at the end, but not as something they have chosen and sought out. It comes of its own accord. Their hopes are disappointed, and they run off. Jesus has chosen them, however, and the loss they experience "for my sake" will be turned to gain because Jesus is raised from the dead. "Taking up your cross" should be seen less as a project than as the character of discipleship. We follow because we trust that God will complete what he has begun at our baptism.

As we shall see, "losing one's life" is appropriate for discipleship in another sense. It means life can be used up, spent, on others. And if our vocation is to care for the neighbor, Luther insisted, we will not need to seek out suffering. It will come routinely, as any parent will attest.

For most of us, following Jesus will involve a cross not of our choosing – and it promises deliverance that is likewise not the result of any grand project.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 9:30-37 ("Who Is the Greatest?")

The second of Jesus' announcements of his death serves not simply to provide foreshadowing of what is to come but to keep Jesus' death and discipleship bound together. In this case, the connection moves beyond the literal possibilities of martyrdom. While Jesus is predicting his death, his followers are discussing which of them is the greatest. Their behavior seems almost too outrageous to take seriously. Perhaps we ought to pause a moment to argue the case of the disciples. Their problem ought not be trivialized. Perhaps they discuss greatness both here and in chapter 10 because they believe Jesus is the Christ. They are convinced that his ministry will end in deliverance and, as his followers, they will undoubtedly be assigned places in his cabinet. They are correct – though they have not the faintest idea what that cabinet will look like or what discipleship will entail. It is not that God's triumph is failure; it is that God's way to triumph involves a cross instead of more conventional means to victory.

Jesus' challenge to his followers is clear to any reader: whoever wishes to be first must be last of all and servant of all. The character of servanthood becomes particular: whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. How this constitutes serving becomes more striking in view of the place of children in ancient society. The law viewed children as little more than property until they reached the legal age of adulthood. Their parents – actually, their fathers – had

absolute authority over them. To welcome children means to abandon one's authority and status, spending them on those with the least ability to repay.

While our notions of parental authority have undergone considerable evolution since Jesus' day, children within the church often have little more status than they did centuries earlier. Discussions of when children ought to be invited to the Lord's Supper often indicate how little baptism really means in some congregations. There is a place for young people in worship only when they are young adults. Sunday school is sometimes a good excuse for excluding children from worship. Children and young people get the message: they know they are not welcome. The dramatic drop in church attendance and participation in congregational programs after confirmation is in large measure a reflection of the lack of interest invested in them. The secret of programs like Lutheran Youth Encounter and Young Life is that leaders make young people welcome and take them seriously.

What does it mean to be a disciple of the one whose career climaxes on a cross? Here, it involves acknowledging new standards of valuation. The death to which Jesus invites his followers is a death to self-importance. And that death is made particular in terms of extending hospitality to young people—to the ones who have always been expendable in times of war, who will be paying their parents' debts for generations, and on whom our future depends.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 9:38-50 (Causing One of These Little Ones to Stumble)

The first theme in this passage picks up the disciples' discussion about their greatness and translates it into attitudes toward outsiders. Their reaction to others outside their circle who work in Jesus' name is suspicion. The passage might well lead into a discussion of jealousy among congregations and denominations.

The feature of these verses that more closely ties the passage to the preceding lesson is a warning about "causing one of these little ones to stumble." It is remarkable how seldom the "little ones" intrude into our imagination. In the ELCA study on human sexuality, for example, there is hardly a sentence devoted to the impact of our actions on children and young people. There is hardly a more important vocation than that of parenting—a task in which congregations and communities are involved. Everything is at stake. The future not only of families but of the church and the society depend upon parents' doing a decent job in raising their children, surely one of the most difficult tasks God has assigned anyone. How is it then that we can discuss divorce and sexuality with hardly a nod in the direction of the impact of our actions on children and young people? Who, for example, has asked about the impact of alleged scientific discussions of sexual "orientation" on young adolescents—particularly males, whom I know best. Are there people so naive as to imagine that awakening the possibility in the mind of a young male that he is perhaps gay or bisexual does not raise doubts and temptations that may prove unbearable and ultimately destructive of the relationships between men and women in which society has everything invested? People cite the work of experts in genetics and adult behavior. What about adolescent psychol-

ogy? The emotional and spiritual well-being of the overwhelming majority of young people is simply ignored in discussions of individual rights.

Our actions have consequences. We exercise freedom within a context in which we acknowledge our responsibility for our neighbors. Paul explores the point on several occasions (1 Corinthians 8-10; Romans 14). If it is true, as Jesus promises later, that one of God's greatest gifts is a place in a family, the other side is acknowledgment of our responsibilities for other family members—in particular, for those young people who have the least ability to defend themselves or understand the kinds of investments that are being made in their future.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 10:2-16 (Divorce and Forgiveness)

The question Jesus is asked about divorce is not merely theoretical. Then, as now, relationships were less than ideal and marriages placed under great strains. The commandments, of course, are explicit about one thing: "You shall not commit adultery." The question is what constitutes adultery. Jesus is strict in his interpretation of the law. Divorce is contrary to the will of God, and even remarriage constitutes adultery.

The matter was disputed among generations of rabbis and had even become one of the famous differences of opinion that separated the two "schools" of Shammai and Hillel. The school of Shammai taught that the only basis for divorce was marital infidelity—adultery. The school of Hillel interpreted the law with far greater leniency. Husbands could use virtually any complaint as grounds for divorce; even burning toast is listed as one possibility.

There are many ways to approach this text. One might argue that the point of the comment about divorce and about children is protection of the weak. Women with young children are particularly vulnerable, even in this society where women can work and at least some child care is available. Wholesale abandonment of young mothers by fathers has swelled the welfare rolls. The passage can be read as a variation on Jesus' reevaluation of society, with women and children elevated to a new importance. Discipleship means serving those most whom society values least.

Such an interpretation, however, should not eliminate the sting of Jesus' statement. Concern for children is precisely what lies behind Jesus' statement about divorce. Preachers ought not move too quickly from these verses just because they make congregations uncomfortable. The law works by making people uncomfortable. Preachers ought not get in the way of the law's work. If marriage laws are necessary to restrain infidelity and to protect the vulnerable, they must be allowed to do their work. In a society where the overwhelming bias is in favor of individual satisfaction, where the stress is on having one's own needs met, the promise of fidelity is constantly under threat. The vocation of marriage and of parenting is one way of serving the neighbor, and the church—as well as society—must do as much as possible to undergird that vocation, supporting fidelity and promises. The matter is of enormous importance because divorce touches so many lives and has such a devastating impact.

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We live in a society where everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven. The church ought to be different. Sins can be forgiven. Is divorce contrary to God's will? Of course. Is God glorified by people remaining in destructive marriages? Certainly not. Are people who have invested themselves in another ever the same after separation? No. Is remarriage a sin? According to Jesus, it constitutes adultery. Can sins be forgiven? Yes – and perhaps that's the whole point. Pastors who blunt the force of the law not only resist God's work in restraining evil and protecting the helpless, but they prevent an experience of genuine forgiveness.

The ability of a society to destroy primary relationships and the consequences of such social disintegration are painfully obvious. Such fundamental tears in the social fabric will not be repaired by the law alone. But a sense of boundaries that mark off behavior destructive to the neighbor will prevent worse devastation.

Good pastors must learn to let the law do its work so that the neighbor can be served and the gospel can be good news.

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 10:17-30 ("Then Who Can Be Saved?")

This passage is another example of the work of the law. Most interesting is the reaction of interpreters to the passage. Some will question the motivation of the rich man: he was obviously selfish and concerned with self-justification. This kind of moralizing tends to trivialize the story. What if we take the man seriously? He insists he has kept the commandments. Why not? Paul insists that prior to his conversion he was "blameless" under the law. Luke speaks of Zechariah and Elizabeth as walking "blamelessly" in the commands and ordinances of the Lord. The problem here is not morality at all. Paul apparently lived a perfectly moral life, but that did not prevent him from persecuting the church. His problem was not immorality but unbelief. The older brother in the parable of the prodigal son is undoubtedly correct when he tells his father that he has not disobeyed a single command. His problem is not irresponsible behavior but an inability to allow his father to be merciful. He cannot celebrate the deliverance of his own brother.

The problem with this passage is that its meaning is utterly clear: to inherit eternal life, Jesus insists, you must give away everything you have. He says this, we are told, because he loves the seeker. His command is not a test but an acknowledgment that the rich man is bound and must be freed. That he is unable to part with his possessions demonstrates the accuracy of Jesus' diagnosis.

Is it true that riches are an impediment to inheriting eternal life? In Jesus' parable about a sower, riches and daily concerns choke the seed and it bears no fruit. Is that the case? There is a pastor who firmly believes that the most effective way of making disciples of people is to get them to give their money – not because they must somehow earn salvation, but because money and possessions become all-consuming and, in this society, are close to the heart of what we are about. Decent schools for the children, a wise investment in a home, stereo equipment that allows for full enjoyment of music, instruments and music lessons for the children, decent health care, braces, skating lessons, golf lessons – without noticing, we commit every cent so that virtually nothing is left for the church and other

institutions that depend upon contributions. And with every dollar church and state borrow to pay for our present comforts, we increase bit by bit the financial burden our children and grandchildren will have to bear.

The story suggests that God wants our full attention. We exist for the sake of our neighbors – which includes spouse and children but is not restricted to them. Before we move too quickly beyond money to other things that consume us we might pause so as not to miss the warning. The man whom Jesus loves, who seems a moral and responsible member of society, *cannot* free himself to follow Jesus. His possessions hold him fast. His survival depends upon being freed to spend himself on his neighbor – and that means spending his money. He is unable to get himself free.

“With God all things are possible.” People can be freed from bondage to their possessions, but it takes a change of heart and a kind of discipline that the coming generation of leaders in church and society has yet to learn. Pastors will serve the church well by allowing the law to do its work in these verses. People are not called to be financially irresponsible but to learn how to give their money away for the sake of those who need it.

There is a remarkable promise in this passage that should not be missed. Jesus promises that those who have spent themselves and suffered for the sake of the gospel will not have to wait until the age to come for full life. He promises new family, fields, homes, and friends – “a hundred-fold in this age.” God does not intend that we live solitary, empty lives. Discipleship involves discovering a new family and a rich life within the community of those who have been grasped by the grace of God and have learned the joy of spending themselves on others.

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