

Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

We can talk about God. We can even transmit profound truths about God. And one of those truths is that God consistently bursts the boundaries of all our ideas about God. God remains the ultimate mystery.

The 14th century mystic who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* said that we can never know God by thought but only by love. “Be willing to be blind,” the author recommends, “and give up all longing to know the why and how, for knowing will be more of a hindrance than a help.”

We need the silence of the desert to purge us from clinging to the limits of our understanding. We need the illumination of mountaintop experiences with the mystery. With practice, everything that we imagine God and ourselves to be can eventually be absorbed in a silence beyond words. And that creates a weakness that makes us strong.

In time, we learn to drop away anything and everything that we *think* about God until we can approach God with what the author of *The Cloud* called “a naked intent.” In that state of radical openness, God can envelop and unify us in the brilliant darkness of love that is God and God alone shining in the soul.

And then there is another profound truth. With the awareness that anything that we say about God will fall short, still we must say something. Words about God are as impractical as they are essential.

From a state of silent awe, we have to come back down the mountain, back to our own circle of family and friends and the people we encounter day to day. With the awareness that our renewed perspective is *still* partial, we also still have to use words to exchange insights and intuitions and experiences with each other. Then we can once again relax the search for explanations and immerse ourselves back into that silence that drops us to our knees.

In our Gospel, Mark's Jesus has returned to the people who know him best to speak the words of God on the Sabbath. And we heard that the people responded by taking offense at him. A more accurate rendering of Mark's Greek says that the people "stumbled over" him.

For centuries, Christians have explained this passage as a Jewish rejection of the Christian Gospel. That teaching is not only a harmful source of anti-Semitism, it misses a more immediate and compelling insight. When this reading is heard in context, we may notice where *we* – where you and I – are stumbling over Jesus today.

In the ancient world, honor was the pivotal social value that permeated every aspect of life. Honor defined each person's status and it was set by your family and birth circumstances. Honor was a limited resource and so the social fabric was maintained by everyone expecting everyone else to remain in their inherited place. The prevailing attitude was that if your life circumstances improved, that could only mean a threat to mine.

And so, the people listening to Jesus grant respect for his wisdom that fits his status. Until, that is, until the point that his words and the power behind them began to threaten their reality.

Mark doesn't give us the specifics of what Jesus taught that day because we already carry the teaching in our hearts. We are already aware of the promise of God's inbreaking realm of love, manifesting in justice and peace among all people. A realm of people united in the pursuit of the common well-being.

In talking about God's heavenly realm coming to earth for all people and God's intent to rule with grace and compassion, Jesus has gone too far. His people understood a king like David, a king who "became greater and greater," as we heard from Second Samuel, "for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him."

But this?

Jesus claims that Adonai, the Lord, is with *him*. They hear him claiming the honor due a King! No wonder they stumble over him! "Isn't this Mary's kid? That small-town *craftsman* who builds with

wood and stone? Where does some day-laborer get that kind of cheek?”

By fearfully clinging to their perspectives as the only possible truth, they cannot or will not open themselves to the vision and blessing that Jesus offers. Even Jesus is amazed.

But you see, from the very beginning, the church has wavered between a desire to rule the world and a desire to renounce it. Some of us still imagine that God wants us to control people through the institutions of earthly power. Others of us are sure that *forsaking* all human institutions is God’s will.

Paul’s response to the church in Corinth is a remarkable refusal to step into the power-based leadership role that they are asking for. Without abandoning them, Paul instead skillfully presents a summary of his experience into the cloud of unity. He relays his own story of a man caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body, he did not know. Caught up into Paradise where he heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

God’s gift of grace prevents Paul from seeking the power of Empire for himself. And *that* is the weakness that allows the power of Christ to dwell *in* him and to work *through* him in communities of people ready to receive the word of God.

The contemplative practices of all the major religions share similar versions of paths through deserts that purge, up mountains for illumination, into unifying clouds of unknowing *and then* to what Zen calls “returning to the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands.”

Despite popular misinterpretations, the goal of any healthy spiritual life is never to actually destroy the self. One of my Zen teachers said that you have to be *someone* before you can be *no one*. We have to have a healthy and grounded sense of self to realize that each of us is a unique image of God, able to love others because we ourselves are loved.

Once we are ripened to a sense of self with humility, God works through the practices of the spiritual life to develop in us a Christ-like ability to empty ourselves. Over time, we notice being more and more fully possessed by the God that we never lacked, but who we are ever more intimately aware of.

And then, we have to rejoin our communities of prayer and practices to shape and be shaped by the liturgy and anchored in the imitation and love of Christ.

Just so, after speaking in the synagogue for the last time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus sends his followers into the world to cast out demons, to heal and to proclaim a change of heart and mind – the on-going, never-ending practice of repentance – turning and returning to Christ in all things and in all people.

Now, there is something intriguing about Mark's Gospel. As Jesus prepares the twelve to go out preaching repentance, he never tells them to preach *about* him. And they don't. In fact, Mark's Jesus frequently tells his followers *not* to say anything about him. Some folks refer to this as the "messianic secret" in Mark.

I wonder. I wonder if what Jesus is doing is not focused on keeping a secret, but is instead, intended to reframe what it means to be the Messiah, the Anointed. If that's so, then he is also trying to change hearts and minds *what* it means to *follow* the Anointed One.

From the earliest days until now, we have tried to make Jesus fit our understanding of an earthly ruler – one who will one day come to carry away those who have behaved like good boys and girls, and punish or terminate with extreme prejudice those who have not.

And yet, Mark's Jesus consistently teaches that the realm of God is already present *and* that we are all invited to participate in God's work of bringing it to creation in its fullness. While Jesus is alive in his humanity to embody God's reign, we may think we know how to follow; we point to Jesus and crown him King of kings.

Once Jesus is crucified, resurrected and ascended, we have to change our hearts and minds. Our understanding of what it means to follow the King of kings, the Anointed One, *transcends* even as it *includes* our obedience and loyalty.

Followership evolves into partnership. And the realm of God comes a little clearer, a little wider, a little nearer.

With our partnership, God can sanctify the smallest of our gestures of love and forgiveness and generosity. God can work the ministry of reconciliation and healing through us as channels of grace and mercy to all the people around us.

God has made us one with Jesus Christ as his sisters and brothers, and fills us with the life-giving Spirit in the communion of the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. Each of us, in our own distinctive way, has capabilities to serve God's work toward wholeness and life; to join God in liberating each other from grief, addictions and fear; to participate in God's yearning to reconcile whatever is separated.

Our bliss-bestowing hands in the marketplace make a difference. Not as a way to earn God's favor, but as a response to

God's grace-filled invitation to partnership; our answer of "I will, with God's help" acted out on behalf of God's creation.

God *has* chosen us to be saved, yes, but the more urgent truth is this: God has chosen you and I to be *used*.

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