

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Jesus’ Germs”
Mark 8:22-39
February 7, 2016

Today marks the halfway point in our journey through Mark’s gospel. If you read the newsletter this week then you were reminded that I’m inviting all of us to read through Mark before Easter.

Hannah Minchow-Proffitt has designed our poster that will be up in the Narthex next week as well as the prayers of declaration that we’ll be putting up. Once you’ve finished reading the gospel, I’m asking you to take one of those prayers, add your name and place it somewhere on the poster.

I know some of you have already started and are making some good progress. Remember, this is the invitation for all of us, children, teens, adults, retirees... We’re doing this as a community to share in this journey together.

And I have to tell you, the more time I’m spending with Mark this year, the more I’m caught up in the artistry of Mark’s writing. The way he puts these stories together and tells the story of Jesus is beautiful and thoughtful and symbolic. He’s using words and images in some very particular way to not just tell random stories about Jesus. He’s not giving us the highlight reel here.

He’s telling certain stories, in a very particular way, to help us begin to see *who* this Jesus is... and then, what it means to be his follower. There’s this broad movement that’s happening over the course of the whole gospel story.

This morning we’re at the halfway point, right in between those two things. We’re also right at the half way point, in terms of the length of the gospel.

And here at the center, in the readings we heard today, the gospel of Mark pivots from the first half of the story that is trying to help us see who this Jesus is... to the second half of the gospel that is trying to help us understand both what that means, and who we are called to be.

If you go back to the beginning, to chapter 1, verse 1, Mark gives us a title for this gospel: **“This is the Good News of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God,”** Mark starts.

Then for 8 chapters he’s been telling stories about Jesus. And all along the way, everyone is asking **“Who is this?”** They’re asking the question of Jesus’ identity. We’ve been hearing that for weeks now. The Pharisees and religious leaders ask it, **“Why does he do these things?”**

The disciples are asking it, **“Who is he that he can do these things?”**

The hometown crowd asks it, **“Isn’t this Mary’s son? Where did he get this wisdom?”**

Herod's court is asking it too, remember? Herod thinks maybe Jesus is John the Baptist, raised from the dead, coming back to haunt him.

And of course the stories Mark's been telling are trying to answer that very question:

He is the one who heals the sick,
who raises the dead,
who cast out the darkness,
who calms the sea,
who's has the power of life and healing and wholeness.
He is the one who is bringing about the kingdom of God.

And now, it's test time.

Jesus finally puts the question that everyone else has been asking to the disciples. And Mark is putting it to all of us who are reading this gospel:

"You've been watching for awhile now. You've been following for some time... and you've heard all the rumors. You've heard what others are saying. But who do you say that I am?"

It is the question that has been hanging out there, and there comes a time when it demands an answer from us. That time has come for the disciples.

There's no more hiding behind what everyone else says. It's time to put a stake in the sand... Humbly, but as best as you can, it's time to answer: **"Who do you say that I am?"**

And in this moment, for the first time in this story Mark is telling, someone makes a confession of faith. **"You are the Christ!"** Peter says.

In other words: **"You're the Long-awaited Messiah.
You're the one the scriptures have been pointing to.
You're the fulfillment of our hopes.
You are the Christ!"**

Not only is it the first confession about Jesus, it's the first time the word "Christ" is used in the title verse at the very beginning. Here, Peter is echoing what Mark named for us in the first sentence of this gospel.

And this moment.... is the turning point in the gospel.

"You're right," Jesus says. "Now let me begin to show you what that means." That's what the rest of this story, the rest of this gospel will be about.

And as we enter this second half of the gospel, Mark begins to show us, that there is a profound difference between starting to recognize who Jesus is... and understanding what that actually means...

what that means about Jesus...
and what that means about us.

Most of the time, we miss that. The church, especially us Protestants, have missed it all too much. We've focused on helping people get the right answer to the first half of the gospel, but we haven't helped people make the journey into the second half.

We've done that in all kinds of ways. Whenever we've turned the goal, the aim, of the gospel into this one question....

when we've made the only question whether or not we've prayed one prayer... we've missed ***the whole*** of the gospel.

It's led to faith becoming reduced to a list of things you must agree with... a list of titles about Jesus or a list of doctrine...

And it completely missed the second half of the journey here.

Yes, we need to wrestle with those questions about who Jesus is... but there is so much more. Peter, he gets the first question right that day, and I imagine he's feeling pretty good about himself... like he has arrived.

But it's short-lived, because in the very next moment Jesus says to him, **“Get behind me, Satan.”**

There is a journey that Peter has yet to make. There is a deeper conversion that is still needed. He thinks he's arrived. But in reality, he's just beginning. And Mark, in his artistic style, sets up this whole moment,

this whole spiritual reality,

this whole transition in the gospel,

with a parable in action . It's the scene right before Jesus asks this question.

This is Mark 8:22-26 is the story that sets the scene for the pivot that's happening in the middle of Mark.... I want to read this.

[read Mark 8:22-26]

It's a really strange healing story, isn't it? It's the only healing that doesn't take on the first try. You almost wonder if Jesus is getting a little rusty here... half way through his ministry.

Or, you know, maybe... the reason the guy can't see clearly is because he still has Jesus' spit in his eye.

Just imagine for a second being the blind guy. You can't see what's going on. You're standing there... Just you and Jesus. You hear him start to clear his throat a little bit.

Yeah. But ***you can't*** see what's coming. And then splat! ...right in your face.

It is kind of gross, isn't it? And then Jesus reaches out and touches his eye? You almost get the idea Jesus is trying to spit-shine the guy's eyeball.

And I kind of get the impression that the blind man isn't real excited about all this, so he tries to act like it worked.

“Can you see anything?” Jesus asks.

“Yeah, Jesus. Thanks! I can see there’s something out there. No need to spit on me again.”

“You Sure?”

“Really I’m fine, Jesus. I’ll just be on my way now.”

“What do you see?” Jesus asks

“Well, I see people.”

Kind of obvious, isn’t it. You can hear them all around you.

So, Jesus pushes back: “What do they look like?”

“Umm... they look like... a bit like trees walking around.”

“You’re not quite there, are you?” Jesus says. “Let me try again.”

...which would sure make me nervous about what’s coming. But, apparently, the man got wet enough the first time. He didn’t need to be re-baptized in Jesus’ saliva... but... ***he did need Jesus to keep working on him.***

This story is a parable in action. It’s a story about more than this one man, who is being healed in stages. It’s also about what is happening with Peter and with the disciples. They are starting to see something... but they are a long way from seeing clearly.

It’s also a story about us...

all of us who have made the confession of faith along with Peter...

all of us who have been baptized and who have confessed with our mouths, “Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is our Lord and our Savior.”

It’s the story telling us that we are just at the tip of the iceberg. And if we think we understand what that means... then there’s a good chance we’re also going to hear Jesus say: “Get behind me Satan.”

In fact, the sad truth is that Jesus has had to say that to the church, again and again, throughout our history.

Whenever we’ve settled for our pre-conceived answers,
rather than wrestling with the crucified life,

Whenever the church has been arrogant rather than humble,
demanding rather than serving...

Whenever we’ve been content staying put with our comfortable answers rather than risking the journey to where the second half of the gospel would take us,
Jesus has had to say to us, “Get behind me Satan.”

You see, all too often the church has stopped here, and this half way point, and assumed we have arrived. And spiritually speaking, that’s an incredibly dangerous tendency we’ve had.

Here, the disciples still think they should have a place of power.

The still think they should use war and violence to change the world.

They still think they should have influence over their society and over other people.

They are still trying to be the greatest, number 1, climbing to the top. We'll see this play out in the second half of the gospel.

It's this same place that **the American church** is still stuck:

clinging to power,
condoning war,
feeling entitled to economic domination,
thinking the ends justify the means...

When all along... for the rest of the gospel, Jesus is going to tell them and to demonstrate for us all, that the opposite is true.

And so now, for the first time, he begins to teach them, **"If you want to be my disciple, then you have to take up your cross and follow me.**

The only way to save your life is to lose it.

The first will be last.

The servant of all is the greatest in the Kingdom of God."

Jesus is not content, nor will he let us be content, by simply getting the first answer on the test right. He won't leave us alone half blind by our own smug assurances... afraid of getting a little more spit in our face.

Because it's the ***second half journey*** where the ***real conversion*** begins to take place... where real transformation begins to happen... and that, Dayspring, is the point of the gospel.

Changed hearts and lives...

transformation of our being...

the healing of our deep blindness...

This is where Jesus is talking us.

Jacob Needelman talks about this in his book, *Lost Christianity*. He says that part of the struggle of our faith is that we're often telling people to ***do*** like Christ, without helping them to ***become*** like Christ.

There is a profound difference between being told to Love, to forgive, to have peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control... and to actually become loving, to become forgiving, to become patient... to developing goodness and kindness and self-control within you.

This is how Needelman puts it: **"We're preaching to stones that they must flow into the ocean. But a stone must become water before it can flow."**¹

A stone must become water before it can flow... There must be an inner changing, a deep healing... a transformation of the self.

¹ Attributed to Father Sylvan in Jacob Needelman, *Lost Christianity*, 119.

Confessing that Jesus is the Christ... is only beginning to see in part. It only puts Peter on the playing field. It got him started and it gets us started. But a profound transformation of his being is still needed.

That is where the second half of the gospel journey will take us. This is also the point of all spiritual work and spiritual practices of our tradition.

It's why meditating on scripture is important.

It's why the practice of prayer is transformative

It's why we need stillness and contemplation.

It's the point of fasting and of taking communion.

These practices are never an end in themselves. They are the practices that turn us from stones to water... that slowly open our eyes to see more and more clear... They are the practices that get us wet with Jesus' germs.

This week we will begin our Lenten Journey. Every year we set aside these 40 days as an intentional season of spiritual growth and preparation to lead us through the cross to resurrection.

We're starting with Ash Wednesday. We'll have 2 services at Noon and 6:15.

Every Wednesday after that we'll have an evening service of prayers led by Terry Minchow-Proffitt.

Lent is also the season where we're are invited to practice fasting in some capacity.

And every Sunday, we'll be receiving communion together again this year. And it will be that weekly rhythm of fasting throughout the week, and coming to the table on Sunday to be fed... that holds great potential for us.

The stations of the cross will also be up around our sanctuary.

And of course, we're all being invited to spend time reading the gospel of Mark.

There is much that is being offered to us... because the honest truth is, there is much our souls need. We can see something out there walking around... but it's awfully fuzzy, isn't it?

So, Jesus, spit in our eyes, if you must.

Take us up on the mountain and reveal your glory to us for at moment,

because the one thing that is pretty clear to us all...

is that we have a long way to go.

Amen.

Reflection:

You see, there is something within human nature, an 'inner self,' which needs to be awakened before the teachings of Christ can 'take on flesh,' that is, actually enter the heart, muscle and bone of a person's day-to-day living." ~Jacob Needelman, Lost Christianity, 121

All of us who are human beings are in the image of God.
But to be in his likeness belongs only to those who by great love
have attached their freedom to God.

Diadochus (5th Century)

To obey Christ's commandments is to love him, and to beseech him, aided by our very weakness, to take possession of us and transform our life with his.

Clement, The Roots of Christian Mysticism

Spiritual work has no value if it does not help to deepen humility, humility as the capacity for love. Spiritual progress has no other test in the end, nor any better expression than our ability to love.
(Olivier Clement)