

Mark and the Biggest Parable of All

BY MARTHA STERNE

If the entire Gospel of Mark isn't a parable, and particularly a parable about power, I don't know what it is. Maybe Mark didn't do much with the little parables because he was so committed to sharing the mystery of the whole life, death, and new life of Christ.

A small insight for what it's worth: When a nice person asks you to write a little sermon inspired by a parable in the Gospel according to Mark, stop and think. You have drawn the short straw. Luke is the guy you want or maybe Matthew. They own the parable gold mines. Mark...ehhhh...not so great. Outside of your seed here or your sower there and of course your wicked husbandmen, Mark's not a parable kind of guy. Sure, Mark says that Jesus taught the crowds many parables (Mark 3:23; 4:2) and that Jesus really only taught them in parables (4:11, 33-34), but then Mark doesn't actually deliver the goods except for a couple of measly stories and some good metaphors.

There is of course in Mark's favor the well-known fact—well-known, at least, in East Tennessee—that if you want people to quickly get the power of the gospel, you hand them Mark and just read with them the whole wondrous strange and scary thing in one fell swoop. You stand there with them in Chapter One when they hear John yell *Somebody's Coming!* And then you just hang on with them for dear life through the hour and a half that it takes to go with Mark from Jesus' baptism and the dove and the heavens torn apart through all the healing and teaching and turning-upside-downing to the betrayal and the trial and the death and the curtain of the temple rent asunder. And finally the empty tomb. And then you stand there at that empty tomb with people while they hear that the women "fled from the

tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). And then boom, there you are with your people with that sly and holy and open-to-eternity-so-not-really-ending. And you ask them *Now What?*

Here's my take. If the entire Gospel of Mark isn't a parable, and particularly a parable about power, I don't know what it is. Maybe Mark didn't do much with the little parables because he was so committed to passing on to us the immediacy and power and mystery of the whole life, death, and new life of Christ Jesus—giving that to us in one huge parabolic arc and then leaving us with the joy and wonder of figuring out *What was that?* What is that now to me? How is this power in this person who talks and lives as if the reign of God is over and around us even now, even when we are so captivated by the powers and principalities of this age?

Until Jesus came along, people understood just one kind of power—the one-up power—and we still seem to be hard-wired to think that one-over-another power is the most real, and well, the most powerful. The prophet Isaiah actually pictures God sitting high above the circle of the earth. So nothing on earth can hurt God—Him being so far up above it all—which provides God with not just a bird's eye view of the world but an incredibly great angle if He wants to aim and smite somebody. With an understanding of the divine like that, what kind of power do you learn to expect from political and economic and religious leaders?

When you think about the way religious people were taught to think about power (and still are taught to think about power), it is no wonder that Jesus has been a problem, particularly for power people. He never did do power right. Not at all.

He didn't get born into the power class. He didn't approach folks the power way, which is to terrify them with what will happen if they don't please you or to seduce them with what will happen if they do please you—although certainly the Church has tried

Jesus didn't gather power to himself. Instead he gave power away from the get-go to some very unlikely, weak people, and it's my observation that he still does.

upon occasion to pull that stuff in the centuries ever since. He didn't gather other people's power to himself. Instead he gave power away from the get-go to some very unlikely, weak people, and it is my observation that he still does. And Jesus didn't stay in one place long enough to build a power structure—I mean, what are you going to do with somebody who keeps moving on to the next village just when he's got this village eating out of the palm of his hand? And he didn't protect himself. And that is the first rule of being powerful, isn't it? Cover your...self.

Scientists say there are many realities—a blood vessel, a river, a cloud, a snowflake, a fern—called “fractals,” which stay true to their pattern or shape no matter how small a piece you take of whole. I believe this is true of the life of Jesus. You can look at the whole parabolic arc of his life or just the parable of a day and you find that the power and the glory radiate the same.

Look at just twenty-four hours in the life of the guy when he gets to Capernaum in the first chapter of Mark. New in town—and immediately

Scientists say many realities are “fractals” that stay true to their shape no matter how small a piece you take of the whole. This is true of Jesus. In the parabolic arc of his life or just the parable of a day, the power and the glory radiate the same.

Jesus wows the natives with the power of his teaching and healing. But you sense what’s coming. Why did he go and heal on the Sabbath? And the healing he did on the Sabbath wasn’t even just healing a broken arm or getting somebody over a dread disease. It was the healing of a man with a demon. Now maybe we don’t think we know anybody with demons but we do. It is not too hard for us

to recognize the pain of sexual obsession, the chaos of terrible anxiety, the demons of self-destructive living, the emptiness of pathological lying to oneself and to others, the horrible weight of hopelessness, the exhausting need to control others and everything that happens, the splitting apart of the very self which reads sometimes as self-disgust and sometimes as self-adoration—although in almost twenty years in this soul business I have never seen a huge ego that was not erupting out of an even huger molten lava lake of self-hate. So demons—yes we know about those. And if I read the apple and Adam and Eve in the Garden right, at one time or another every single person on earth knows the business end of demonic possession.

It’s always struck me as strange that especially in Mark, Jesus tells the demons not to talk about him. That bothered me until I thought, why on earth would you want the unhealthiest, neediest, craziest part of people talking about you? Which is of course the way power usually grabs hold of folks. Somebody gets hold of our neediness and our weakness and our fears and touches those off and gets us obsessing about them and talking about them and wow—we’ll give away power to just about anybody. And Jesus wouldn’t go there.

Instead of acting like a power-person, with a mapped out strategy of who will get him where he needs to be, Jesus just heals whoever crosses his path—the demoniac one minute and a few hours later the mother-in-law with a fever. She is such a wonderful real touch. He went to Simon Peter’s

house and she was sick and he healed her and then she could fix a meal. I used to think that was kind of rude of Jesus and the rest of the men to expect her to get out of a sick bed and fix supper. In Mississippi where I was raised, we used to like to recover for a while and get rested up. But now I have known so many East Tennesseans, women and men, who hunger to be able to do the little tasks of their lives – fix supper, mow the lawn, vacuum the house, pay the bills, walk the dog, whatever the little tasks of lives – for those are pleasures that you yearn for when you are too sick or weak or distracted to live your life.

And so Jesus healed the sick and the lame and the other people that showed up with demons. And instead of sitting way up there out of the pain of the human experience with a map and a tracking system targeting who to smite and who to skip until maybe they get out of line and then it is time to smite ‘em – instead of all that, he just went around healing and telling people the good news.

Which turns out to be that God loves us. That God knows that most of us, most of the time, do not need a god to smite us. We need a savior with a way, a truth, a life. We need a way to have thankful hearts. We need the truth that helps us be less self-absorbed. We need a life that includes reaching out to our neighbors and we need them to reach back toward us. We don’t need someone stirring up our demons. We need someone healing us of them.

All those people Jesus healed in that twenty-four hours in Capernaum before he moved on, well, they are all dead now. Jesus didn’t cure them of what kills us all – the mortal truth of being human. But in that twenty-four hours he showed them and us what is more powerful than death – love – and what is more real than any kingdom we can cobble together.

For the message Christ came to live into us is that God is not out there, out of the circle of life, sitting on a throne ready to take aim and smite. God loves us and God is here within us and among us and through us – ready to silence our demons, heal our souls, and enlarge our lives. That is why Jesus came all this way to live and die a new kind of power – the power of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. What if we help each other to live in the Kingdom of the Power of that Good News just for today and then again maybe just for tomorrow and see what happens?



MARTHA STERNE

is Rector of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Maryville, Tennessee.