

Chapter Ten

Mark 10:1-9 Moses and Divorce

Then he got up and left Galilee and went off to the borders of Judea and beyond the Jordan. Again great crowds assembled to meet him, and again, according to his custom, he taught them. Then some Pharisees arrived to ask him this test-question. "Is it right for a man to divorce his wife?"

Jesus replied by asking them, "What has Moses commanded you to do?"

"Moses allows men to write a divorce-notice and then to dismiss her," they said.

"Moses gave you that commandment," returned Jesus, "because you know so little of the meaning of love. But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female'. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'. So that in body they are no longer two people but one. That is why man must never separate what God has joined together."

In this passage Mark pictures Jesus fighting cultural morality in a different manner than pictured earlier in his Gospel. Earlier we see Jesus and his disciples not washing their hands when they are supposed to and continuing their healing mission on the Sabbath in spite of the fact that this violated a strict interpretation of Sabbath work customs. In these instances, Jesus is pictured as attacking the strictness of customary morality—seeing this strictness as an overemphasis on the trivial and an underemphasis on the profound intent of the Mosaic tradition.

In the current passage, the Pharisees are advocating a looser view than Jesus. Jesus is countering with a perspective that is far more strict. These male Pharisees want to retain the custom of divorcing a wife whenever they see fit by a simple writ. Jesus does not deny that this rule exists in the Mosaic heritage, but he dismisses it as an adaptation that came into being because of obstinacy or untouchability on the part of hardhearted members of this lineage. Jesus refers his listeners to the original intent he finds in the creation narrative. Men and women are to leave parents to become one flesh, one person, one operating unit. Having been so joined by the Infinite Determiner, they must not be separated by an arbitrary human action. Clearly this is not what these questioning Pharisees want to hear. Their moral righteousness is once again being undermined by Jesus' teachings.

Mark was probably supporting the custom of no divorce as the appropriate practice within the communities for which he was writing. But we need not understand Mark as supporting the divorce customs of the medieval and modern churches. Conservative Catholics have interpreted this passage to mean that a marriage ritualized by the Church was not to be dissolved unless it could be shown to have not been a true marriage in the first place. Many conservative Protestants have also considered divorce as something completely out of bounds. This strict view of no divorce has become objectionable, however, to many contemporary Christians who realize that many

current marriages are dysfunctional and should be dissolved for the well-being of all concerned.

So, how can these teachings of Mark (and perhaps also Jesus) to be understood as instructive for us? Let us notice, first of all, that in this teaching we see a defense of women against the arbitrary willfulness of men. In the customs of Jewish life in the times of Jesus and Mark, only the man, not the woman, could ask for this writ of divorce. The teaching, therefore, is a challenge to men to see women as something more than objects of their convenience. God made humanity male and female. And when joined, the two are one body. So for a man to cast away his wife is likened to casting away his leg. Such loyalty to marital intimacy remains a valid challenge. This teaching asks us to overcome arbitrary egoism and surrender ourselves into full responsibility for other human beings.

Nevertheless, we need not see this teaching as support for the moral position that divorce in the modern world is never appropriate. Even though “no divorce at all” was the custom within the first century church, it does not have to be the custom in the twenty-first century church. The Bible is not a rule book for all time, but the witness of rule-makers living in their own times. Today we need, most of all, to reassert the ethical context of both Jesus and Mark toward all morality—namely, that the rules are made for humanity, not humanity for the rules. Present and future Christian communities can take to heart the radical responsibility for one another implied by this teaching; and within that context they can still evolve different divorce customs than those used in the first century Christian communities.

When have you seen marriages that needed to be dissolved for the benefit of all involved?

When have you seen marriages dissolved too arbitrarily?

What do you see to be the deepest issue at stake in these matters?

Mark 10:10-12 Divorce and Adultery

On reaching the house, his disciples questioned him again about this matter. "Any man who divorces his wife and marries another woman," he told them, "commits adultery against his wife. And if she herself divorces her husband and marries someone else, she commits adultery."

Again, Mark is having his Jesus character talk further about something in private with his disciples. We need to assume that the disciples, as depicted in Mark's gospel, are asking the questions that Mark has experienced being asked within the Christian communities to whom Mark is speaking. Mark's communities were surely provoked by Jesus' teachings on divorce. So Mark has Jesus reassert his teaching even more strongly.

New Testament scholars have pointed out that the historical Jesus could not have actually said the words in this passage, for these words reflect Roman customs rather than the traditional Jewish customs within which Jesus lived. In Jewish customs only the man could divorce the woman. In Roman customs the woman could also divorce the man.

So Mark, in these verses, is clarifying what he believes Jesus would say if he were still talking to us, namely that divorce is adultery whether initiated by the man or the woman. It is important for us to realize that in the New Testament gospels Jesus goes on teaching decades after his death—just as Moses in the first five books of the Bible goes on teaching centuries after his death. Mark (as well as Matthew, Luke, and John) has no qualms about deciding what Jesus would say to each new situation. The Gospel writers saw themselves as the body of Jesus, the Christ. They saw themselves as the extension of Jesus into their times. Here is a crucial implication of these facts: *we in the twenty-first century who are indeed followers of Jesus Christ may also see ourselves as extensions of Jesus into our times.* If we are indeed “in Christ” in the sense of being in that radical freedom and compassion, then we can decide what Jesus would say to these times about marriage and divorce and on any other ethical topic. Indeed, contemporary Christians must decide what Jesus would say on topics which the historical Jesus never had an opportunity to address. If we are “in Christ,” we are his resurrected body; therefore, we are not only permitted, but responsible to speak for Jesus.

What do you have to say to our times about adultery, divorce, marriage and related topics?

What are some topics that Jesus had no opportunity to address that need to be addressed in our times?

Mark 10:13-16 Children in God’s Domain

Then some people came to him bringing little children for him to touch. The disciples tried to discourage them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant and told them, “You must let little children come to me - never stop them! For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Indeed, I assure you that the man who does not accept the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Then he took the children in his arms and laid his hands on them and blessed them.

With high probability, this teaching about children and the Kingdom of God is rooted in the actual teachings of the historical Jesus. But as Mark uses this teaching, the disciples are depicted as an expression of what we might call “adultism.” The disciples think that Jesus surely has more important things to do than bless children. It is as if the disciples are saying, “There are many adult projects and many unanswered questions. Why waste time greeting these children?”

Jesus is pictured as indignant toward this attitude. He goes on to explain that we are all children relative to participation in the Kingdom of God. “The Kingdom of God” is Jesus’ term (and Mark’s term) for a fully restored society of humanity that manifests the

“Reign” of these God-given qualities: trust of the Final Reality, essential freedom, and unconditional love. This “Kingdom” is the domain of living for which we were created in the beginning, from which we have fallen, but to which we can be restored through the message which Jesus is embodying. In this *divine* domain of living, there are no self-important adults. We are all children in tone. We are all ignorant learners receiving authentic life from the hand of our all-powerful *Parent*. To put this paradox even more starkly, we might say that to be grown up in Spirit means to be like children and to respect children as what we want to be like.

“Accepting the Infinite domain as a child would” means reaching out your hands and taking the food you need, opening up your arms and taking the love offered, running enthusiastically toward the gift of life being given to you. On the subject of receiving life, it is quite true that children are often wiser than self-important adults who think they must somehow deserve what they get.

Implied also in this passage is the view that the Spirit life is not an achievement. The Spirit life is a free gift. Openness to the Spirit life is the only requirement. Human-made impediments are the only problem. The Spirit life is our natural inheritance, from which we have fled or strayed, rebelled or defied.

What are these teachings about children and adults saying to you right now about your own Spirit journey?

Where do you need to be more like a child in your living?

Mark 10:17-22 The Man with Money

As he began to take the road again (after welcoming the children), a man came running up and fell at his feet, and asked him, "Good Master, what must I do to be sure of eternal life?"

"I wonder why you call me good," returned Jesus. "No one is good—only God. You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother'."

"Master," he replied, "I have kept carefully all these since I was quite young."

Jesus looked steadily at him, and his heart warmed towards him. Then he said, "There is one thing you still want. Go and sell everything you have, give the money away to the poor—you will have riches in Heaven. And then come back and follow me."

At these words his face fell and he went away in deep distress, for he was very rich.

The first happening in this story is an exchange about being “good.” Jesus seems to reject being called “good.” “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Some interpreters of this verse have argued that Jesus was good because he was God. But there is no support anywhere in the New Testament for the notion that Jesus, the man, was synonymous with the Wholeness of the Infinite Mystery. Jesus, seen as

the Christ, was the Message or the Word from the Wholeness of the Infinite Mystery. In him the Infinite Silence is speaking to us. The paradoxical New Testament proclamation is about meeting the fullness of God in Jesus, the Christ. This does not mean confusing a particular earthly human being with the Final Power that is pictured as creating, sustaining, and destroying the cosmos.

So what does this phrase "No one is good except God alone" mean? Jesus is challenging the perspective of this man who is apparently assuming that Jesus has made himself good and is thus deserving eternal life. The man is saying, "If you have done it, how can I do it?" Jesus does not claim to have achieved goodness. He rejects that entire program of standard religion. "God alone is good" means that anything about humanity that we can call "good" is God's action within us, God's creation of us, God's restoration of our human essence.

Jesus continues with the other part of the man's question, the question about what to do. He lists the ancient teachings of Moses. "Do that," he says. The man says he has done that his entire life. Jesus likes this man; he appreciates him for his diligent practice of their common religious heritage.

Jesus also sees through what it is keeping this man from experiencing the eternal life that the man himself senses he is missing. This man needs to make a bold move. Jesus suggests one. Sell what you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and come along with me traveling from village to village and living off the generosity of those who are accepting our message. This is a viable proposal to this man. He might have actually done what Jesus proposed. What an opportunity—to travel along with this most outstanding teacher!

But this man is stunned by this suggestion. He goes away dejected. For he is clinging to a vast fortune of wealth.

What gets in the way of your taking advantage of the best teaching available to you about boldly taking on your essential humanity?

Mark 10:23-27 The Eye of the Needle

Then Jesus looked round at them all, and said to his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who have great possessions to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were staggered at these words, but Jesus continued, "Children, you don't know how hard it can be to get into the kingdom of Heaven. Why, a camel could more easily squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man get into the kingdom of God."

At this their astonishment knew no bounds, and they said to each other, "Then who can possibly be saved?"

Jesus looked straight at them and said, "Humanly speaking it is impossible, but not with God. Everything is possible with God."

Again, Jesus is pictured as speaking to his disciples in private. This time Mark is using sayings that may have been uttered by the historical Jesus. "How difficult it is for those who have great possessions to enter God's domain." Mark pictures the disciples as amazed by these words; apparently the disciples hold the common view that wealth should be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. So the point is made even more emphatically by Jesus in this story, "It's easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye, than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain."

Interpreters through the ages have tried to water this saying down. Some have suggested that the needle's eye meant a narrow gate which a camel would find it difficult but not impossible to pass through. But it is more likely the meaning of Mark in the passage that Jesus is picturing the much more humorous picture of a big lumbering camel clambering through the eye a sewing needle.

Why does wealth provide such an obstacle to entry into God's domain? Living in God's domain means being loyal to the Infinite Mystery which provides all wealth and takes all wealth away. To enter this domain, one must relate to wealth with detachment, with non-clinging—that is, with a willingness to see wealth pass away and as well as arrive. Those who have great wealth have quite commonly blown up their ego with attachments to wealth that are indeed the size of a camel. With such a self-understanding, detachment would certainly seem like passing through a needle's eye.

The disciples are still shocked by Jesus' explanations. So Mark has Jesus assure them that all things are possible for God. The implication of this teaching is that detachment is indeed possible for anyone, whatever the extent and object of their attachment.

What attachments do you have which seem impossible to surrender?

What would it mean for a huge corporation or business to act in detachment from wealth in dealing with workers, with local communities, with poverty, with the environment?

Mark 10:28-31 So What about Us?

Then Peter burst out, "But look, we have left everything and followed you!"

"I promise you," returned Jesus, "nobody leaves home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property for my sake and the Gospel's without getting back a hundred times over, now in this present life, homes and brothers and sisters, mothers and children and land—though not without persecution—and in the next world eternal life. But many who are first now will then be last, and the last now will then be first."

Peter voices for the rest of the disciples and perhaps for all of us in every generation, "What about us who have left everything to follow you?" Jesus replies that the follower will be rewarded here and now a hundred fold. There will be persecutions, but there is

also eternal life. When we see the metaphor “in the age to come,” we should not jump to the conclusion that Mark is talking about the immortality of the soul. “The age to come” is Mark’s mind means a very down-to-Earth possibility—a future in which humanity is putting service to God before service to wealth or status or any other finite thing. God’s domain (profound humanity living realistically) is always an age to come, but this (end of time) domain of realism is also a present possibility into which humans can enter in the here and now of everyday living.

The central point of this passage is that living fully our authentic, profound, real human lives is worth every possible sacrifice. It is worth it right now, and for all time to come.

How do you find your Spirit life rewarding?

What might you be unwilling to sacrifice for your Spirit life?

Mark 10:32-34 The Son of Adam Will Suffer, Die, and Rise

They were now on their way up to Jerusalem and Jesus walked on ahead. The disciples were dismayed at this, and those who followed were afraid. Then once more he took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to him.

"We are now going up to Jerusalem," he said, "as you can see. And the Son of Man will be betrayed into the power of the chief priests and scribes. They are going to condemn him to death and hand him over to pagans who will jeer at him and spit at him and flog him and kill him. But after three days he will rise again."

This is not a story about the strange predictive powers of Jesus. The historical Jesus of Nazareth probably knew that going to Jerusalem was dangerous. He certainly knew that his actions were making many people angry enough to kill him. He probably knew that this march on Jerusalem was a continuation of his death-risking attack on the status quo of his times. But we need not assume that Jesus the real man knew exactly what was going to happen to him any more than you and I would know in a similar situation. Death is certain, but the time of death and the manner of death are uncertain. That is the human situation.

Mark is telling this story in retrospect. Mark is preaching his gospel. The disciples in Mark’s story are a portrait of the people in Mark’s community of hearers. Indeed, people of any time and place may not wish to know that the authentic person (the son of Adam) is invariably hated by the defenders of the status quo and is vulnerable to ridicule, suffering, and death at their hands.

Jesus, in Mark’s story, is a hero figure who knows this truth that authentic persons are ridiculed, suffer, and perhaps die at the hands of those who do not wish to be audited relative to their authenticity. And this hero figure knows something else: even if killed the authentic person is not defeated. Authenticity rises again. Authenticity cannot be killed, because it is authenticity supported by the Final Realty.

The disciples in this story do not understand rising again and do not even question Jesus about it. They are simply apprehensive and frightened by the obvious danger of making a frontal attack on the cultural capitol of their times.

Surely we can identify fully with these disciples. We too quite commonly steer away from making a frontal attack on the cultural capitol of our times. We are not even at work building up some sort of following and/or strength to make such an attack effective. We probably think that people who do operate in this fashion have some sort of martyr complex or act in some other form of foolishness. Perhaps we view such people as dangerous persons with whom we do not want to be associated. By our actions, we commonly say, "If ridicule and suffering at the hands of the cultural status quo is what it means to be an authentic person, then count me out."

When have you experienced fear relative to the dangers of living your calling to be authentic in some public enactment?

Mark 10:35-40 James' and John's Unholy Request

Then Zebedee's two sons James and John approached him, saying "Master, we want you to grant us a special request."

"What do you want me to do for you?" answered Jesus.

"Give us permission to sit one on each side of you in the glory of your kingdom!"

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I have to drink? Can you go through the baptism I have to bear?"

"Yes, we can," they replied. Then Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink the cup I am drinking, and you will undergo the baptism which I have to bear! But as for sitting on either side of me, that is not for me to give—such places belong to those for whom they are intended."

James and John want to be heroes, and they want recognition for it. They ask to be second and third in the hierarchy of Jesus' heroic victory. They apparently think that they are willing to pay the price for this honor. But Jesus mocks them, "You have no idea what you are asking for. Are you really willing to drink the cup I'm drinking and undergo the baptism I'm undergoing? "

Mark has woven the liturgical life of the first century Christian community into this challenge of Mark's Jesus character. The Eucharist feast has to do with drinking the cup of death. The baptism ritual also has to do with accepting death, with being washed by death of all your temporal attachments. The type of thoroughgoing inward death that is signified by these familiar rituals is a form of heroism on the battlefield of honor, but a transformation of life that when lived out typically leads to some sort of ridicule and rejection. Indeed, James and John do not know what they are asking for. There is no honor of a customary sort to be found on this Jesus-path or in this Jesus-victory on this risky path.

There are those who walk the Jesus-path more fully than others. There are those who are especially effective in being the healing presence of authenticity to others. In this sacred economy of authentic living, we might speak of second and third places to the first place that Jesus symbolizes. But these secondary places do not belong to Jesus to hand out to others. Jesus is not a typical king who can hand out positions. The king that Jesus is to be seen to be is a very strange sort of king. This strange king is the servant of servants in a kingdom of servants, and this king has no authority to designate who is or who is not the best servant.

This passage, like several others, turns the whole subject of honor on its head. Yes, authenticity is an honor, but it is unlike all other honors. First of all we do not achieve this honor or deserve it. And this authenticity is rejected vigorously by most people. Living out this authenticity entails embracing ridicule, suffering, and death. This is the cup that the disciple of Jesus is being invited to drink. If we are expecting some sort of customary honors for following Jesus, we are not drinking the cup he offers.

What are the parts of this powerful story that challenge you?

How have you faced choices between seeking the safety of customary honors and risking being your uncustomary authenticity?

Mark 10:41-45 The Number One Servant

When the other ten heard about this, they began to be highly indignant with James and John; so Jesus called them all to him, and said, "You know that the so-called rulers in the heathen world lord it over them, and their great men have absolute power. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must become the servant of you all, and if he wants to be first among you he must be the slave of all men! For the Son of Man himself has not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life to set many others free."

The other ten disciples are annoyed with James and John. This is the way community works when the customary view of honor is operative. Some are first, and the rest are annoyed.

Jesus makes it clear that the customary hierarchical patterns of civilization are not to be the model in the community he envisions for his followers. In this strange community the greatest honor goes to the slave. "Slave" in this context means "servant of others." Perhaps the word "slave" has contemporary meanings that do not communicate what Mark means here. His Jesus character used power words to contradict powerful misunderstandings. This "slave" or "complete servant" is the one who self-consciously makes the focus of his/her life the well-being of the rest of the community. This strange slave/servant must not be confused with codependent weakness or with the style of knuckling under to tyranny and oppression. It is impossible to find that style of living in the exemplar Jesus. No, the slave that Jesus himself demonstrates is a bold self-

confident servant—a kingly sort of slave who boldly abandons all the customary honors of living in order to be what is needed in the contingencies of his or her times.

Finally, this passage states the paradox of all paradoxes: the one who gives up all honors to become the servant of all others is the number one person in the Domain of the Final Reality.

How have you faced choices between having status and being an authentic servant to the times in which you live?

Mark 10:46-52 The Twelfth Healing Story of a Hebrew Persons—Blind Bartimaeus

Then they came to Jericho, and as he was leaving it accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd, Bartimaeus (that is, the son of Timaeus), a blind beggar, was sitting in his usual place by the side of the road. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth he began to call out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!"

Many of the people told him sharply to keep quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have pity on me!"

Jesus stood quite still and said, "Call him here." So they called the blind man, saying, "It's all right now, get up, he's calling you!"

At this he threw off his coat, jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked him. "Oh, Master, let me see again!"

"Go on your way then," returned Jesus, "your faith has healed you." And he recovered his sight at once and followed Jesus along the road.

With this story, Mark tells his last healing story. It is the twelfth healing story in which a Hebrew person is healed. Let us recall that all of these healing stories are parables about the healing of Israel and of you and me as potential members of the people of God. With that in mind, let us look again at the list of Mark's twelve Hebrew healing stories:

1. A man controlled by an unclean spirit
2. A woman down in bed with a fever
3. A leper--an unclean outcast from society
4. A man paralyzed and prone on a mat like dead
5. A Sabbath synagogue worshiper with a crippled hand
6. An uncontrollable man in the tombs by the sea with a "Legion" of filthy spirits who enter 2000 pigs who are drowned in the sea
7. A woman unclean with a 12-year-old flow of vaginal blood

8. A 12-year-old daughter of a synagogue leader who is in a sleep like death
9. A man who can't hear and can't speak
10. A blind man who needs two tries to open his eyes widely enough to see clearly
11. A violent mute-spirit the disciples can't heal because it takes more prayer
12. The brash, blind beggar at Jericho named Bartimaeus (the son of Timaeus). Timaeus means "highly prized."

In this twelfth healing Jesus heals the son of "highly prized" and this man follows Jesus on the road, the road to Jerusalem. Israel is indeed highly prized, but Israel has been blind. As we saw in the tenth healing story, even Peter, the leader of the new Israel, is blind in relation to the rejection, suffering, and death of Jesus. This is what the old Israel and the new Israel are having a hard time seeing: *how could a person suffer such a fate and still be the Messiah?* In the tenth healing, a blind man can't see clearly after the first encounter with Jesus. He only sees humans as trees walking. But after a second encounter with Jesus he sees clearly. This blind beggar in the twelfth Israelite healing sees right away.

One encounter with Jesus is enough for the blind beggar named "son of highly prized." He cries out to have his sight, and he runs to Jesus when called. He boldly asks to see, and he is told by Jesus that his trust has cured him. Immediately, he regains his sight, and, unlike some of the others who were healed, he follows Jesus on the path from Jericho to Jerusalem. The road to Jerusalem, the cultural capitol of the people of Israel, is where Jesus will be rejected, tortured, and killed. This blind man sees in spite of having to see this tough future.

This very small portion of Israel sees clearly. This is the New Israel. We, the hearers of Mark's story, still have several chapters to go. Do we see? Do we get it? Do we really understand what Mark is driving at with his entire gospel? How can it be that this country teacher, slain by the authorities in the cultural capitol, is also the exemplary messenger from the Source of the entire cosmos? Is this ordinary person Jesus indeed revealing to us what it is to be authentic human beings—sons and daughters of the Absolute All-Powerful Infinite Mysteriousness that is providing us with all things?

Today, what are the spiritually blind people blind to?

What would it mean for us to see?

Who do you know that does see?

Chapter Eleven

Mark 11:1-10 A Kingly Entry into Jerusalem

When they were approaching Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage and Bethany on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, he sent off two of his disciples with these instructions, "Go into the village just ahead of you and as soon as you enter it you will find a tethered colt on which no one has yet ridden. Untie it, and bring it here. If anybody asks you, 'Why are you doing this?', just say, 'The Lord needs it, and will send it back immediately.' "

So they went off and found the colt tethered by a doorway outside in the open street, and they untied it. Some of the bystanders did say, "What are you doing, untying this colt?", but they made the reply Jesus told them to make, and the men raised no objection. So they brought the colt to Jesus, threw their coats on its back, and he took his seat upon it.

Many of the people spread out their coats in his path as he rode along, and others put down straw which they had cut from the fields. The whole crowd, both those who were in front and those who were behind Jesus, shouted, "God save him! - 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' God bless the coming kingdom of our father David! God save him from on high!"

Mark has constructed this story with influence from Zechariah 9:9:

*Look, your king comes to you
triumphant and victorious
human and riding on an ass
on a colt, the foal of an ass.*

Jesus is pictured as making his dramatic entry into the cultural capitol seated on a baby donkey, not a silver stallion. Such images signal that this is a strange and humble sort of king. Nevertheless, people celebrate him as the coming successor of David, who was a sort of "King Arthur" in their common memory. Mark is a master of irony. He pictures Jesus as the king, the successor of David, yet Mark knows that the people singing "Hosanna" are blind to what this means. As the time comes for Jesus to be fully established as his sort of king, these same people will all flee away.

Also, it is interesting to note that Mark inserts a bit of humor into this story—the bold borrowing of the colt. Jesus has the disciples say that "its master has need of it." This brash ruse seems to quiet any objections to the semi-theft of this colt. Mark is also hinting to the readers of his tale that Jesus is indeed the master of this colt, (as well as every other being in the cosmos). Jesus, who is being considered to be less than nobody by the somebodies of his time, is viewed by Mark as somebody beyond our wildest most exaggerated expectations.

But this somebody-hood of Jesus is a secret. It is not obvious at all—not to the disciples who travel with him—not to the people who sing “Hosanna.” Seeing the secret of Jesus’ greatness requires a new set of eyes. And it will take Mark a few more chapters to get these eyes issued to the readers. Even then, we, the readers, may not get it. It takes a very special set of eyes to see Jesus as King of the People of God.

If you are inclined to celebrate Jesus, what is the the significance that you are celebrating?

What issues still haunt you about this old mythic talk about the significance of Jesus.

Mark 11: 11-14 A Fig Tree with No Fruit

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple and looked round on all that was going on. And then, since it was already late in the day, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

On the following day, when they had left Bethany, Jesus felt hungry. He noticed a fig-tree in the distance covered with leaves, and he walked up to it to see if he could find any fruit on it. But when he got to it, he could find nothing but leaves, for it was not yet time for the figs. Then Jesus spoke to the tree, "May nobody ever eat fruit from you!" And the disciples heard him say it.

Mark includes this strange little story at this point as a context for Jesus’ critique of the temple practices. The temple of the people of God is supposed to produce fruit. It is supposed to feed people. When people are hungry for Spirit nurture, the temple is supposed to have food. As we will see, the temple in Mark’s story is fruitless. We must be careful not to use this story as a means of demeaning of Jewish religion. Any religion, at various times in its development, becomes obsolete and fruitless.

The appropriate response to a fruitless religion is honest critique, but not the critique of one religion in terms of some other religion. The appropriate critique of any religion comes from a place beyond religion, from the Spirit foundations of human life, from the authenticity of being human which all religions fragmentarily express or, in their perversions, flee from expressing. All religion can be critiqued, beginning the the religious and I and you are attempting to practice.

Mark’s story of the fig tree suggests how we should relate to all religion that has become obsolete or perverted. Expose it as the fruitless reality that it is! It does not matter how heroically on target that heritage has been in the past. Today is the day of judgement on all things including my and your religion.

What have been your experiences with fruitless religion?

What would it mean for you to be an open critic of fruitless religion?

How can you, nevertheless, be affirmative of creating religion that bears fruit?

Mark 11:15-19 The Temple as a Hideout for Crooks

Then they came into Jerusalem and Jesus went into the Temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of the dove-sellers, and he would not allow people to carry their water-pots through the Temple. And he taught them and said, "Doesn't the scripture say, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?'. But you have turned it into a 'den of thieves!' "

The chief priests and scribes heard him say this and tried to find a way of getting rid of him. But they were in fact afraid of him, for his teaching had captured the imagination of the people. And every evening he left the city.

In this story Mark may be working with an actual memory of the actions of the historical Jesus. It is probable that Jesus actually did carry out bold criticisms of the temple practices of his day. In Mark's story, we see Jesus chasing out vendors and shoppers, overturning tables and chairs, and stopping the delivery of goods. This is a direct action protest. This is intended to get widespread popular attention. Any protest needs interpretation and this is the meaning Jesus gives to what he is doing: "Do not the Scriptures say, 'My house is to be regarded as a house of prayer for all people?'. But you have turned it into 'a den of thieves!' "

This critique angers the authorities to such an extent that they keep looking for a way to get rid of him, but he is protected by the crowds who are simply astonished at his teachings.

A thoroughgoing critique of religion is almost always astonishing. Religion usually assumes some sort of absolute authority. So challenging that authority can reveal deeply defended delusions. Such work is dangerous. Jesus and his disciples did not stay in the city after dark.

What valid critique of our contemporary Christian religious practices would enrage the authorities and astonish the masses?

Mark 11:20-25 The Power of Prayer

One morning as they were walking along, they noticed that the fig-tree had withered away to the roots. Peter remembered it, and said, "Master, look, the fig-tree that you cursed is all shriveled up!"

"Have faith in God," replied Jesus to them. "I tell you that if anyone should say to this hill, 'Get up and throw yourself into the sea', and without any doubt in his heart believe that what he says will happen, then it will happen! That is why I tell you, whatever you pray about and ask for, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

Apparently withering a fig tree is not difficult for a person of prayer. Even moving a mountain is possible with sufficient conviction. Indeed, if we fully trust God, whatever we ask for will be given. Many of the teachings of Jesus seem to be characterized by gross exaggeration. Jesus shoves his listeners out of their normal boxes of thought and action by making these preposterous statements.

We can intuit the Spirit power of these sayings when we locate those items in our life that seem like mountains to us. Does the economic well-being of all citizens seem like a mountain to us? Sufficient trust and conviction can move that mountain. Does creating the family life we want seem like a mountain to us? Sufficient trust and conviction can move that mountain. Does overcoming our destructive habits seem like a mountain of impossibility? Sufficient trust and conviction can move that mountain.

So, what is this powerful trust and conviction that can move such mountains. It is the power of our inherent Spirit-level human freedom. Our lives are not like disks of recorded music, playing themselves out. Each of our human lives is an unwritten story that we ourselves have ample power to write. Of course most of us most of the time have sold our inherent freedom to some victim image of slavery. We are guilty of self disempowerment at a basic level of our living. Jesus' statements are intended to shock us into deeper thinking about the possibilities of realism and bolder action in the exercise of our essential freedom.

Prayer is about the exercise of our essential freedom. Prayer is the trust and conviction that Jesus and Mark are telling us about. Prayer has to do with dying to our present limited sense of reality and allowing our real possibilities to open before us.

What do you most want in your life right now?

What would it mean for you to pray for that outcome in the depth of trust and conviction that would indeed allow some realistic version of that hope to happen?

Mark 11:26 Praying for Forgiveness

And whenever you stand praying, you must forgive anything that you are holding against anyone else, and your Heavenly Father will forgive you your sins."

When forgiveness for our own wretched past is what we want, this saying provides us with the key to such realization. We need to trust in Reality's forgiveness for everyone, including ourselves. Are we holding anything against anyone? Our parents? Previous lovers? Present family members? Present friends? Present enemies? If we want forgiveness for our own wretched living, the key is accepting forgiveness for all these people as well.

Forgiveness comes like rain for everyone, or there is no forgiveness for anyone. Forgiveness is a for all or for none deal. The Infinite Overall Powerfulness that sustains the whole cosmos stands ready to welcome all persons home to the actual here and now of realistic living. If we harbor the hope that the Infinite will crush those we hold something against while dealing leniently with us, we are confused about the essence of forgiveness. Clinging to our supposed *need* for revenge clouds our trust that we

ourselves are forgiven—yes forgiven in spite of all our misdeeds, remembered and forgotten. Accepting our own forgiveness is quite simple, but it costs us a renunciation of excluding others from the domain of forgiveness. As we read elsewhere in the New Testament, we tend to see our own vision as clouded by a tiny speck, while the vision of others is clouded by a tree trunk. Such feelings of comic superiority over others has to go, when we seek and accept forgiveness for ourselves.

Accepting forgiveness for ourselves does not mean that we do not see what we see in the lives of others. It means seeing more than we think we see. In spite of the greatest delusion, dysfunction, and downright wickedness of a human life, the possibility remains for realistic living to start again—living this next moment in a more realistic and powerful fashion. Starting over that way may seem like a mountain that will not move, but if in trust and conviction we say to any mountain of estrangement, “Move,” it will move. That mountain will get up and run pell mell into the sea and be drowned. In other words, estrangement is not part of the really, Real. Estrangement is a made-up worlds that comes into being through the exercise of the gift of human freedom and also through the cowardly refusal to exercise the gift of human freedom. Estrangement is a bondage because it has spent human freedom to be in bondage.

What are you holding against someone?

What would it mean for you to surrender that holding and thus accept forgiveness for everyone including yourself?

Mark 11: 27-33 By what Authority?

So they came once more to Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the Temple, the chief priests, elders and scribes approached him, and asked, "What authority have you for what you're doing? And who gave you permission to do these things?"

"I am going to ask you a question," replied Jesus, "and if you answer me, I will tell you what authority I have for what I do. The baptism of John, now—did it come from Heaven or was it purely human? Tell me that."

At this they argued with each other, "If we say from Heaven, he will say, 'then why didn't you believe in him?' but if we say it was purely human, well . . ." For they were frightened of the people, since all of them believed that John was a real prophet.

So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." "Then I cannot tell you by what authority I do these things," returned Jesus.

Jesus tricked these ranking priests and scholars into admitting that they did not act by the authority of some deep truth, but by the fear of public opinion. They pretended to be authorities, but actually they were mere slaves of the reigning views. They did not have the courage to confront the people or Jesus.

Many of those in the crowd listening to Jesus must have smiled to see the hypocrisy of these high-ranking people exposed. Also, the listeners were themselves left with this question: "By what authority did Jesus do what he did?" Perhaps Jesus, like John, was a genuine prophet. Perhaps they said to themselves, "We will hear this man out."

The power of a person speaking from his or her own inward conviction of authenticity is a power deeply respected by the best intuitions of everyone. Authenticity will only be feared and attacked by people who are fleeing from their own authenticity. Such flight is especially obvious in people who are clinging to some possession of authority (the Bible, the Pope, the Koran, or simply current opinion).

What authorities have you been tempted to cling to?

When have you spoken with your own authority, like Jesus, knowing just what to say?

What prevents you from always speaking thus?

Chapter Twelve

Mark 12: 1-12 The Parable of the Greedy Tenants

Then he began to talk to them in parables.

"A man once planted a vineyard," he said, "fenced it round, dug out the hole for the wine-press and built a watch-tower. Then he let it out to some farm-workers and went abroad. At the end of the season he sent a servant to the tenants to receive his share of the vintage. But they got hold of him, knocked him about and sent him off empty-handed. The owner tried again. He sent another servant to them, but this one they knocked on the head and generally insulted. Once again he sent them another servant, but him they murdered. He sent many others and some they beat up and some they murdered. He had one man left - his own son who was very dear to him. He sent him last of all to the tenants, saying to himself, 'They will surely respect my own son.' But they said to each other, 'This fellow is the future owner - come on, let's kill him, and the property will be ours! So they got hold of him and murdered him, and threw his body out of the vineyard. What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard is going to do? He will come and destroy the men who were working his vineyard and will hand it over to others. Have you never read this scripture —'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?' "

Then they tried to get their hands on him, for they knew perfectly well that he had aimed this parable at them—but they were afraid of the people. So they left him and went away.

This parable is clearly directed toward the religious teachers who feel themselves in charge of the vineyard of Israel. The owner of this vineyard is none other than God; the religious teachers are just tenants. These wicked tenants wish to own the vineyard for themselves and not serve the owner, which is their true function. Prophets come, the wicked tenants mistreat or kill them. The owner's own son comes, and they kill him, too. Obviously this parable is meant to discredit those who had consented to Jesus' death and encourage those listening to this parable to honor Jesus in spite of his

rejection and death. It is also obvious that Mark has given his character Jesus a bit more to say than the historical figure Jesus probably said.

So in this parable, what happens to the vineyard? It is given to others. Religious teachers are disposable. The heritage of Israel can pass on into other hands. Contemporary clergy, bishops, popes, and institutions are also disposable. The Christian heritage can pass on into other hands.

Mark has his character Jesus strike a final blow by quoting a Scripture about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone of the building. Jesus is to be the new cornerstone in Mark's new building.

The religious teachers listening to Jesus in this story got the point being made. They would have arrested Jesus then and there except for their fear of the people. These teachers wanted to be intimidators of everyone, but they cannot intimidate Jesus. In the end of this story, they become intimidated by their own fear of those they wished to intimidate.

Both Jesus in this story and Mark writing this gospel take delight in enabling the people to laugh at the tyrannizing authorities. Even the hostility of the authorities toward Jesus is shown to be laughable. In the stories that follow, Mark continues to use this style of attack on the antiquated religious community. Laughing at unreality is established here a tool of redemption.

What would it mean for you to take delight in laughing at smug religious authorities?

Have you ever felt that the true prophets and their followers were laughing at you?

Mark 12: 13-17 The Pharisees Question Him about Taxes to Caesar

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and some of the Herod-party to trap him in an argument. They came up and said to him, "Master, we know that you are an honest man and that you are not swayed by men's opinion of you. Obviously you don't care for human approval but teach the way of God with the strictest regard for truth—is it right to pay tribute to Caesar or not: are we to pay or not to pay?"

But Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said to them, "Why try this trick on me? Bring me a coin and let me look at it."

So they brought one to him. "Whose face is this?" asked Jesus, "and whose name is in the inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied. And Jesus said, "Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God!"—a reply which staggered them.

This story is another example of Mark encouraging us to laugh at the panic of religious authorities to discredit the true prophet, Jesus. The religious authorities obviously believed that people generally hated paying taxes to Caesar and that a truly honest

person like Jesus would support that popular position. Then they could turn Jesus over to the authorities for seditious teachings. But Jesus turns the tables on them. He points out that they are all using Roman money that belongs to Rome. So “give to Caesar what is owed to Caesar.” And then Jesus indicates where the fundamental audit is located in the lives of these religious authorities: “and give to God what is owed to God.”

What we owe our governing authorities is fairly definite and limited, but what we owe God is much more inclusive. If “God” means the The Final Reality we face, then we owe to this Reality the obedience of being realistic, we owe honesty and integrity, we owe a whole life of behavior that fits the situations in which we live, we owe openness to our actual futures and an abandonment of our binding pasts.

What specifically do you sense that you owe God at this time in your life?

Mark 12: 18-27 The Sadducees Question Him about Resurrection

Then some of the Sadducees (a party which maintains that there is no resurrection) approached him, and put this question to him, "Master, Moses instructed us that if a man's brother dies leaving a widow but no child, then the man should marry the woman and raise children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers, and the first one married and died without leaving issue. Then the second one married the widow and died leaving no issue behind him. The same thing happened with the third, and indeed the whole seven died without leaving any child behind them. Finally the woman died. Now in this 'resurrection', when men will rise up again, whose wife is she going to be—for she was the wife of all seven of them?"

Jesus replied, "Does not this show where you go wrong—and how you fail to understand both the scriptures and the power of God? When people rise from the dead they neither marry nor are they given in marriage; they live like the angels in Heaven. But as for this matter of the dead being raised, have you never read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him in these words, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not God of the dead but of living men! That is where you make your great mistake!"

In order to understand this passage, it is important to understand that Jesus, the Pharisees, and most of the peasant population held a belief about the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. The gist of that belief was that no one was going to get away with anything. In this present life, they may not be appropriately rewarded for their righteousness or punished for their unrighteousness, but in the resurrection at the end of time there would be a final reckoning. This notion that we return to dust and are then reassembled at the end of time may seem very strange to us, but Jesus and the early church apparently supported this belief. The idea of the immortality of the soul was not known to them or honored by them. Immortality was a Greek idea that entered into the Christian discussion later.

Also, it is interesting to note that the Sadducees mentioned in this passage were a first century Jewish group who maintained that there is no resurrection. Perhaps this belief fitted them well, for the Sadducees were deeply compromised with the Roman rule and loosely obedient to the Mosaic heritage.

This dialogue in its present form was created by the early church, but it probably reflects ideas that Jesus did hold. Mark apparently uses this story here in order to tell us once again that the resurrection is a more mysterious happening than we are prone to assume.

In this story, the Sadducees come to Jesus with a highly literal hypothetical about the resurrection at the end of time. They want to see what Jesus will say about resurrection, a belief which they consider silly.

Jesus does not accept their crass literalism. He (Jesus in Mark's story) suggests that the resurrection will be something more innovative than a mere repetition of our current finite lives. To even talk about marriage among resurrected beings is a false assumption.

Then Mark includes an even more astonishing spin. He talks about a common way in which the Hebrew heritage speaks of God—namely, as the God of its three primal ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He infers that since God is the God of the living not the dead, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must still be among the living. *They are already resurrected!* He tells the Sadducees that this is where they make their mistake. Apparently, resurrection has for Jesus (and certainly for Mark) a more mysterious meaning than these literalistic Sadducees had in mind with their clever question.

What would it mean for you to be among the living and thus worship the God who is the God of the living?

Mark 12:28-34 The Greatest Commandment

Then one of the scribes approached him. He had been listening to the discussion, and noticing how well Jesus had answered them, he put this question to him, "What are we to consider the greatest commandment of all?"

"The first and most important one is this," Jesus replied—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength'. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. No other commandment is greater than these."

"I am well answered," replied the scribe. "You are absolutely right when you say that there is one God and no other God exists but him; and to love him with the whole of our hearts, the whole of our intelligence and the whole of our energy, and to love our neighbors as ourselves is infinitely more important than all these burnt-offerings and sacrifices.

Then Jesus, noting the thoughtfulness of his reply, said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God!" After this nobody felt like asking him any more questions.

In this conversation with a friendly scribe, Mark establishes that Jesus is grounded in the very heart of the Hebrew tradition. Both Jesus and this scribe agree that the heart of that tradition is something deeper than rules about burnt offerings, sacrifices, or any

other particular matters. The core of the heritage is to love God with every aspect of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus says that clarity about this makes us very close to the kingdom of God—the authenticity of obedience to the Absolute Reality. The dawning of this obedient humanity is the core of Jesus' teaching. And for us to enter this obedience has to do with love—love for the Infinite Mystery met in every event. It also has to do with loving each of the beings that is placed in our lives by this Infinite Presence.

What such loving means could be the theme of many discourses; here I will point out this one central meaning. Loving the actual neighbors that come into our lives is at the same time loving the Infinite. Loving each real, specific, glorious or wretched neighbor is loving that Infinite Source of all neighbors.

Such love need not mean liking or approving these neighbors. It certainly does not mean coddling them or knuckling under to them. Such love is not an emotional feeling; it is an action of compassion. Such love is the action of affirming the presence and needs of all neighboring beings in our lives. We need not affirm what these neighbors think they need. When enacting this love, we act with our own insights concerning what these neighbors need. We may be wrong, but we ask Reality, not that neighbor, about what that neighbor needs. We must listen to that neighbor, for the realism we seek to employ; but we listen not for the opinions of that neighbor, but for what Reality is saying to us about realistic love for that neighbor. We are not coddling, but serving the neighbor. And serving, not coddling, also applies to loving ourselves.

Affirming our own lives and affirming our neighbors' lives are parts of the same affirming—the affirming of the Source of all things. Clearly, such affirming has to do with promoting realism, not coddling, whatever we or others may think or tend to think is real.

The instruction to love others as we love ourselves also gives us guidance on what loving others means. Loving others means everything it means to love our own selves. If we know what affirming ourselves means, then we know in a basic way what affirming our neighbor means. There is no need for confusion about this. There is, however, a need for maturity in understanding what loving ourselves means. All of us start out misinformed about what is truly good for us. And, as we shall see, Mark (and Jesus as Mark remembers him portrays Jesus in Mark's narrative) are going to teach us that what is good for us is loving God with all our inward and outward strengths.

What do you know today that you did not always know about loving yourself?

What do you know today that you did not always know about loving others?

How do you now talk about what it means to love God?

Mark 12:35-40 Beware of the Teachers of the Law

Later, while Jesus was teaching in the Temple he remarked, "How can the scribes make out that Christ is David's son, for David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'."

David is himself calling Christ 'Lord'—where do they get the idea that he is his son?"

The vast crowd heard this with great delight and Jesus continued in his teaching, "Be on your guard against these scribes who love to walk about in long robes and to be greeted respectfully in public and to have the front seats in the synagogue and the best places at dinner-parties! These are the men who grow fat on widow's property and cover up what they are doing by making lengthy prayers. They are only adding to their own punishment!"

Whether or not the Messiah is the son of David is a theological issue that arose in the early church. How could Jesus be the Messiah if he is not of royal lineage stretching back to David? Luke's and Matthew's gospels imply that Jesus was a descendent of David; however, since the historical Jesus was apparently from a class of landless carpenters, the claim for his Davidic ancestry is probably a piece of theological fiction.

Mark's gospel does not attempt to say that Jesus was a biological son of David. Instead, Mark has Jesus reject the need of the Messiah to be David's descendent. Mark has Jesus say that David, speaking by the inspiration of spirit (Mark is referring to Psalm 110:1), addresses the Messiah as Lord. So how could the Messiah be David's son? It was common belief in Mark's time that Psalm 110 was speaking of the Messiah. And it was also a common belief that David had written this Psalm. We now know, with high scientific probability, that both of these beliefs false, but that is not important for interpreting Mark's point.

Mark's theological point was that nit-picking scholars had no grounds for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah because of doubts about Jesus' Davidic ancestry.

Immediately following this remark about David, Mark includes a saying that may have been actually said by the historical Jesus, "Look out for the scholars who like to parade around in long robes and insist on being addressed properly in the marketplaces and prefer important seats in the synagogues and the best couches at banquets." This saying is a stiff challenge to all clergy and religious scholars in all ages and in all religions. Jesus is indicating that the religious leaders we need to follow are those who are servants of our Spirit needs rather than those who assume religious leadership for whatever status and honor it might bring them.

Mark also condemns these clerical practices: preying on widows, saying long prayers, and putting on airs. Mark apparently believed that Spirit genuineness among religious leadership was hard to find. This can be true in any era. We also should be on our guard against all clergy, all religious scholars, and we should be especially on our guard when such persons manifest that they are simply playing this role for the status which it brings them.

How do you practice a certain wariness about religious leadership?

How are you tempted to status flaws in your own leadership roles?

Mark 12:41-44 The Giving of a Poor Widow

Then Jesus sat down opposite the Temple almsbox and watched the people putting their money into it. A great many rich people put in large sums. Then a poor widow came up and dropped in two little coins, worth together about a halfpenny. Jesus called his disciples to his side and said to them, "Believe me, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. For they have all put in what they can easily afford, but she in her poverty who needs so much, has given away everything, her whole living!"

This seems to be a fairly straightforward story. The so-called "big givers" to the religious establishment may not be so big after all. A seemingly little giver may be the biggest of all. Sincerity in placing one's entire life on the altar is the bottom line for the giving that Jesus and Mark recommend. Implied here is that a religious establishment would contribute more to Spirit health if they replaced their plaques to big donors with plaques that challenge us to sincerity. A religious establishment should be wary about doting on its big givers who pay for buildings and staff salaries. Instead, leave plenty of room for announcing honor toward any and all expressions of full sincerity.

How would you describe the difference in your own experience between giving part of what you have for status and giving your whole life in service?

What does this teaching tell us about the qualities needed in the contemporary reorganization of Christian community?

Chapter Thirteen

Mark 13:1-2 The Temporality of Religious Temples

Then as Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Master, what wonderful stonework, what a size these buildings are!"

Jesus replied, "You see these great buildings? Not a single stone will be left standing on another; every one will be thrown down!"

Mark, and Jesus as Mark presents him, were not enthralled with beautiful temple buildings. To get the thrust of this passage, we have to realize that Jesus' words apply not only to Jewish temples or to one particular Jewish temple, but to all religious buildings, all Christian cathedrals, all modern church buildings, even all skyscrapers and other buildings of humanity. All of them will be thrown down. None of them are permanent. And the sacred is something far more profound than a building. This passage does not imply that we should be contemptuous of ancient Buddhist statues or Medieval cathedrals or Hindu temples or any other artistic treasure. Good art is something valuable, and it needs to be preserved for the enrichment of ourselves and future generations. Nevertheless, all art and all artistic buildings are finite attempts to

express the inexpressible. However glorious religious buildings may be, they are not the essence of any religion. In the movement of Spirit-deepening that Jesus and Mark understood themselves to be initiating, magnificent buildings were peripheral. Furthermore, the God of history would eventually destroy them all. All finite things do indeed pass away, and may become irrelevant even though they remain standing.

In particular, the glorious temple that Israel had built and dedicated to the God of history, was not going to be protected until the end of time by the Almighty in whose name it was built. Indeed, when Mark wrote his gospel, he already knew that this temple had been torn down by the Romans. For Mark and his audience the destruction of the temple implied that the end of time was already happening. This ancient expectation of the end of time expresses a deep secret that we all know, but may not want to know: *time is always ending everything that can come to an end.*

What are the most impressive and/or beautiful buildings you have seen?

What does it mean to you to experience a sacredness that is more impressive than these buildings?

Mark 13:3-10 When Will These Things Happen?

Then while he was sitting on the slope of the Mount of Olives facing the Temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew said to him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? What sign will there be that all these things are going to be accomplished?"

So Jesus began to tell them: "Be very careful that no one deceives you. Many are going to come in my name and say, 'I am he', and will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be alarmed. Such things are bound to happen, but the end is not yet. Nation will take up arms against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in different places and terrible famines. But this is only the beginnings of 'the pains'. You yourselves must keep your wits about you, for men will hand you over to their councils, and will beat you in their synagogues. You will have to stand in front of rulers and kings for my sake to bear your witness to them—for before the end comes the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations.

The disciples ask the question "When?" Sure, all things pass away, but when? The words that Mark has his character Jesus say in this passage are not words that we can attribute to the historical Jesus. Mark is telling about history that has happened since the death of Jesus. A few of Jesus' sayings may be mingled into this thirteenth chapter of Mark, but in the main this long speech attributed to Jesus is a literary construction put together by Mark and other Christians after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem 66-70 C.E. Many of the images of extreme suffering depicted here reflect events that had already happened. The conquest of Jerusalem was indeed this awful.

In this war between rebelling Jewish Zealots and Rome, the land was devastated and terrible famines happened as well. According to Mark, even earthquakes complicated the picture. Perhaps it only felt like earthquakes. Mark was recalling some very tough decades in overall Jewish history. Actually, Mark was giving a positive interpretation to all the terrible things that had happened. He was saying that all this trauma, including Christians being beaten in synagogues and arrested and standing before

rulers and kings, had been part of the drama of getting the good news of the Christian breakthrough proclaimed to all the nations of the earth.

Mark's audience hears Mark telling a story about how Jesus anticipated all these things, but the actual message Mark is communicating to his audience and to us is this: Don't panic! Don't give up! Don't be thrown off course by horrific events! Everything is taking place in the way it must take place. Be cool. Keep the faith. Do your Christian living. Proclaim the good news.

What times in your life were experienced by you as full catastrophe living?

In such times, what did it mean (or might it have meant) not to panic but to continue believing in the good news of your acceptance and authorization by the Infinite Reality?

Mark 13:11 Don't Worry about What to Say!

But when they are taking you off to trial, do not worry beforehand about what you are going to say—simply say the words you are given when the time comes. For it is not really you who will speak, but the Holy Spirit.

This teaching is not about leaning on magic and never preparing talks or court cases. It means that we can prepare—for years, for weeks, for days—and each situation is still new and challenging. We are, in spite of all our planning, dragged into unexpected and even threatening situations. So: "Do not worry, words will be given." By whom? By the Holy Spirit? So, what is this Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is not you or me in a narrow sense—such as, our personality, self image, or whims. But in the sense of our profound humanness, the Holy Spirit is really me or really you. The Holy Spirit is definitely not the you or me that is worrying about what to say. The Holy Spirit is always confident. The Holy Spirit has no need to worry: the Holy Spirit is *Eternally* given and grounded. The Holy Spirit is simply the *Truth*, the *Truth* that is present when I get my "worrying me" out of the way. In other words, if we are genuinely committed to live the *Truth* of our own deep authenticity, an authenticity that includes our freedom, we are prepared to provide a true witness in any and all circumstances. "Holy Spirit" is sometimes pictured as a wind that blows through us. So we might picture this Spirit wind blowing through our worried self. And we can also affirm that this *alien wind* of Holy Spirit is our true self, our profound humanness that the Infinite Realty has created and sustains. In addition, we can be forgiven for abandoning this Holy Spirit and thereby find ourselves restored anew to freely living this Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit can simply *be there* to empower us when our "worried self" is set aside.

I recall a vivid personal experience that may illustrate this dynamic. My mentor who was a very effective and popular speaker had to cancel a series of three talks at a

college campus for a religious emphasis week. He asked me to substitute for him. So here I am on an airplane going to Billings, Montana worried about the fact that these teachers and students were expecting Joe Matthews, and they were going to get just me. I had never done this before. I had done many courses, but addressing large gatherings like this and conducting fire-side chats like this was new to me. Somehow on that plane I decided, "Well I'll just have to do my best, and let that be."

Flaws I am sure there were, but freedom was also there to make my witness and to respond helpfully in those students in those fireside chats. If anyone was disappointed, they did not say so.

As I was flying home I felt sort of rocked. I had experienced something that robbed me of all my excuses about facing such challenges in the future.

This everyday example of overcoming a bit of anxiety about what to say in a speaking engagement cannot be compared with those who were hauled before judges on trial for their lives, but perhaps it does illustrate how this dynamic of Spirit applies to everyday living as well as to those most extremes challenges.

When have you found yourself worried about saying the right thing?

When have you been willing to set aside your worrying self and lean on the Spirit of Truth that blows or dwells at the core of your being?

Mark 13:12-23 The Abomination of Desolation

"A brother is going to betray his own brother to death, and a father his own child. Children will stand up against their parents and condemn them to death. There will come a time when the whole world will hate you because you are known as my followers. Yet the man who holds out to the end will be saved.

"But when you see 'the abomination of desolation' standing where it ought not —(let the reader take note of this)—then those who are in Judea must fly to the hills! The man on his house-top must not go down nor go into his house to fetch anything out of it, and the man in the field must not turn back to fetch his coat. Alas for the women who are pregnant at that time, and alas for those with babies at their breasts! Pray God that it may not be winter when that time comes, for there will be such utter misery in those days as had never been from the creation until now—and never will be again. Indeed, if the Lord did not shorten those days, no human beings could survive. But for the sake of the people whom he has chosen he has shortened those days.

"If anyone tells you at that time, 'Look, here is Christ', or 'Look, there he is', don't believe it! For false christs and false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders, to deceive, if it be possible, even the men of God's choice. You must keep your eyes open! I am giving you this warning before it happens.

Again, Mark is using this literary device— having his character Jesus speak of historical events that have already happened in Mark's lifetime. Why would Mark have done this? What did this passage mean to the people Mark was addressing or for us now. I suggest that Mark is saying that those devastating events—these desecrations of Mark's own religious heritage—were not signs that God no longer cares for us. Such things

happen as part of the process of liberating humanity. We need to pay attention to such events, but we do not need to panic or lose our faith that God loves us.

The phrase “the abomination of desolation” is a phrase taken from the book of Daniel. Mark, I am guessing, is using this phrase to allude to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Perhaps Mark was also alluding to future *abominations* that Christians may face in the future.

Mark is also recalling that some Christians were indeed carried away by these passing panics, giving in to some wild enthusiasm of some false messiah. Even today, in both orderly times and horrid times false *christs* do arise and proclaimed “comforting foolishness.” Such lies are passionately followed by many.

This passage is also a witness to the fact that Christianity has had the vitality not to only survive, but to spread its victorious message during very difficult times. We still living members of this faith have no valid excuse not to make our witness to our own challenging times.

What are some of the most devastating and perhaps desecrating events you have experienced in your lifetime?

How have or might such events strain your faith that God loves you?

What false christs have to noticed that require our awareness and avoidance?

Mark 13:24-37 Look to the Future and Stay Alert!

"But when that misery is past, 'the light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light; stars will be falling from the sky and the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations'.

Then men shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then shall he send out his angels to summon his chosen together from every quarter, from furthest earth to highest heaven.

"Let the fig-tree illustrate this for you: when its branches grow tender and produce leaves, you know that summer is near, at your very doors! I tell you that this generation will not have passed until all these things have come true. Earth and sky will pass away, but what I have told you will never pass away! But no one knows the day or the hour of this happening, not even the angels in Heaven, no, not even the Son—only the Father. Keep your eyes open, keep on the alert, for you do not know when the time will be.

"It is as if a man who is traveling abroad had left his house and handed it over to be managed by his servants. He has given each one his work to do and has ordered the doorkeeper to be on the look-out for his return. Just so must you keep a look-out, for you do not know when the master of the house will come—it might be late evening, or midnight, or cock-crow, or early morning—otherwise he might come unexpectedly and find you sound asleep. What I am saying to you I am saying to all; keep on the alert!"

This passage of New Testament writing is one that many of us would prefer to skip. Obviously, any literalistic handing of this fantastic poetry to predict specific

catastrophes in our history is bogus biblical interpretation. And in addition to that objection, we may be asking, “Why has Mark put such extreme language in his narrative?” And what is the relevant spirit message to us today?

“the light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light”

This may allude to a total solar eclipse. Such an event would have been quite frightening in Mark’s century when most people had no satisfying scientific explanation to sooth the shock of such a happening. Sun and moon were then seen as permanent friends, almost gods for many people. For the sun to go dark and the moon to be a black dot signaled some sort of end of time—or end of cosmos was on the way. And for the stars to be falling meant that the whole of nature was coming apart:

the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations.

Stars have been for most people a symbol of permanence and dependability. For Mark to imagine stars falling is a statement of their impermanence, of their un-godlike quality. This is also a witness to the overarching power of Eternity, and to the vulnerability of all things thought dependable. Our modern science also tells us that each star was not always present, and will not always be here. We even see with our telescope-assisted eyes the clear evidence of exploding and passing stars. We can know that all things and all our thoughts about these things are impermanent.

Mark is telling us that this total impermanence require our attention. Also, in this thirteenth chapter of Mark’s narrative, he is preparing us for the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. The disciples are going to experience all their expectations of order and permanence being shaken to the foundations in experiencing Jesus’ crucifixion. Their lives are going to move into an experience of total emptiness that has end of time qualities. Contemporary theology has spoken about this emptiness as “realized eschatology—the end of the world now.

However, this end of the world is not the end of Mark’s story. This total emptiness of the disciples will be pictured by Mark as part of path to an equally massive fullness. Resurrection is Mark’s main theme. Mark’s final address in this wildly cryptic thirteenth chapter of his narrative is about paying attention to the appearance of resurrection as the back side of the cross. Anticipating this quality of hopefulness that comes into play soon after this end of the world emptiness is contained in these phrases: “You must keep your eyes open,” and “What I say to you I say to all; keep on the alert.”

So for what do we 21st Century spirit adventurers need to keep on the alert? We need to be alert to the very same things as these disciples: the coming of false prophets and the end of the world as we know it. Mark is claiming that the end of the world will happen in the lifetimes of the generation to whom Mark’s Jesus is speaking. Mark

meant the world had come to an end and was still coming to an end in lifetime of Mark and his audience. So how did the end of the world actually happen in Mark's lifetime? Mark's Jesus said, "The light of the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light; stars will be falling from the sky and the powers of heaven will rock on their foundations."

Did all this happen in Mark's generation? Yes, it did! But not everyone noticed that it took place. It was a secret happening. We have to have special eyes to see this happen. Mark's address has been passed on to us to warn us of our own 21st century need for alertness. Can we see the end of the world in our generation? Can we see beyond the experience of complete emptiness to the resurrection of profound humanness.

I tell you that this generation will not have passed until all these things have come true. Earth and sky will pass away, but what I have told you will never pass away!

When have you experienced events that ended the world as you knew it at that time?

And can we see "resurrection" on the back side of that world coming to an end?

Afterword

Mark did not end his narrative with chapter 13. Indeed, Mark's original narrative did not have chapters and verses at all. It moved right on to what we now call chapters 14, 15, and 16. Mark meant for his readers to read 1-13 before 14-16. So I invite you, the readers of this commentary, to read again the commentary on chapters 14-16. Perhaps these stories in 14-16 will look even more profound to you having read 1-13.

I asked you to read 14-16 first, because I believe that 1-13 point beyond themselves (that is, they were meant to be cryptic by Mark himself). The deep secret of chapters 1-13 is revealed in 14-16. The early chapters were meant to be cryptic to first century readers. I believe these chapters have become incomprehensible to most 21st century readers. We need to find our way to a personal experience of cross and resurrection (chapter 16) before a single verse of Mark's narrative can be fully illuminated.

Nevertheless, Mark's Good News is a secret only in the sense that it takes a transformation of our lives to see this Good News. To those who are still avoiding such a radical transformation, the secret remains. The whole Gospel of Mark is a parable, a *koan* to use the Zen-Buddhist term. Jesus spoke in parables. Mark tells his whole story of Jesus as a parable.

We 21st century Christians will also find it useful for us to learn to speak in parables—to proclaim this Gospel to others with the understanding that it remains a secret to

everyone who has not yet yielded their sense of truth to the truth of cross and resurrection. Mark intended for his followers to get this secret, and thereby for every verse of his narrative to make perfect sense. Mark assumed that some of his hearers were, like the disciples, ready for a bit more explanation than most people. But whether you find yourself right now as “most people,” or as “disciples,” or as “tomb visitors” with the surprised women, Mark wants you to get the secret that Mark is hiding and revealing to us.

Mark’s narrative reveals Good News for everyone, whatever their religious practice or lack of one. Yes, there are Buddhists who have gotten this Good News, even if they have never heard of Jesus or Mark. The same can be said of Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and any other human beings of any other religious practice or lack of religious practice. This is just a human message, Good News for everyone. And hearing this secret requires nothing more than our own death and resurrection—a transformation that requires no religious presupposition. Jesus himself asserted, according to Mark, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were among the living. Paul used Abraham as a model of faith consistent with Paul’s death and resurrection mode of living. The writer of John’s Gospel has Jesus say that he “has sheep who were not of this fold.” Yes, there is a Christian fold, and some in that fold have heard the secret. But this secret is about a profound humanness that can show up anywhere—at any time and place.

Finally, if rebuilding Christian practice is what we want to do, we will need to begin with Mark’s secret, with getting this secret, and with proclaiming this secret to others.