

What Was That About?
Sunday, June 27, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

So ... honesty time. How many of you had the same reaction I did when you just heard that Gospel ... and that is

“What was that about?”

Yeah, right? I’m actually glad to hear that.

I have to say I thought I knew the Gospel of Mark pretty well, but my reaction when I read this earlier this week was two things

First: “Seriously, that’s in Mark?”

And second, “What in the world is he talking about here?”

One of the things I love about using Dr. Wil Gafney’s women’s lectionary is that we get portions of scripture that we have never heard in church before. They are the unexpected word that can either pass right by us if we have sort of zoned out during liturgy .. or can leave us shaking our heads saying, “what in the world was that about?”

And ... they are also an invitation into an adventure. To dig deeper and actually try to answer that question ... or at least wonder about it together for a bit.

So, the first one of these is easy – and, as I said, maybe you were way ahead of me on this one. Yes, this actually is in the Gospel of Mark.

The second one ... What in the world is he talking about here? Well, that’s where the adventure begins.

So first of all, let’s set the stage, who is Jesus talking to ... because that’s super important.

So this reading is from Mark 7:10-13, which is not in that three year cycle of readings we use in worship every Sunday. However, verses 1-8 and verse 14 and 15 ARE in the lectionary – so those might be more familiar. Only the people who put together the lectionary decided just to skip over these four verses.

Hmmm ... why? We’ll wonder about that in a moment.

For now, here is the part you might have heard before.

Mark 7:1-8 has Jesus addressing a group of religious leaders who had been criticizing Jesus' disciples for eating without ritually washing their hands. Now this wasn't about hygiene or epidemiology or even "dude, that's gross." The religious leaders ... as many of us who dress like this and stand in pulpits sometimes do were setting themselves up as paragons and arbiters of righteousness. They knew the law ... and if you wanted to be righteous ... which also translated into if you wanted not to be shamed and cast out of the community ... you would do as they said.

They were the judges of worthiness.

Now Jesus' is listening to them, and his eyes get real big, like Mookie Betts when he sees a big fat hanging curveball just sitting out over the plate and he knows he can just knock this one into the left field pavilion. Because what Jesus knows is that this has nothing to do with righteousness ... it's about power and control. And he knows this because he knows Torah ... and he knows that the religious leaders are pretty fond of doing what, frankly, we all are prone to do from time to time which is cherry pick which parts we want to follow and which parts we choose to ignore.

Now, I actually think that's OK. It's actually good – as long as we're honest about it.

First of all, scripture is way too important to be taken literally ... and all of it is a product both of the culture it emerged from and millennia of interpretation. So, we have to do what we are doing right here and unpack it and try to figure out what is really going on here. And there will be times where as a community we will decide that the greater commandment of love causes us to say, "Yeah ... think we need to set that one aside."

"Slaves, obey your masters" ... or "Women are to be silent in the churches" are pretty good examples of that.

And ... there will also be times where what scripture is telling us is absolutely what we should do. And we just can't bring ourselves to do it.

"Go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, then come and follow me."

We really are being asked to do that. We are being invited to put our whole trust in God and each other and have no personal possessions whatsoever. That is absolutely the natural endgame of walking with a revolutionary Jesus.

And ... I haven't done it. You haven't done it.

One of my favorite U2 lyrics is from God Part II when Bono sings "Don't believe in riches but you should see where I live." If you've been to the rectory, that isn't exactly the house of the revolutionary Jesus.

But that doesn't mean we discard that passage. In fact ... it's important that we keep reading that passage and holding ourselves to that standard not to shame ourselves but to let God keep loving us an inch at a time into someday being able to be free enough and fearless enough to live this way.

So anyway, back to Jesus and that big hanging curveball the religious leaders just gave him.

He reaches back and he begins his swing.

Jesus says: "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

"You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

"You are a bunch of cherry pickers!" Jesus says. You carefully select the commandments that are about outward ritual and behavior ... you know, the stuff you can always be careful to be doing when you know everyone is watching ... you make righteousness all about that and that's how you stay in power and make all the people afraid of your judgment and shame.

And that's where the lectionary reading usually stops ... and picks up again with Jesus addressing the gathered crowd.

But the lectionary leaves out the best part ... we see Jesus take the swing but we never see him connect with the ball. And that's the piece of the reading we get this morning.

Jesus references the commandment "honor your mother and your father." But you all say – he says to the religious leaders – but YOU all say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'A Korban – gift offering to God - is whatever support you might have had from me. Then, you all release them from any obligation for mother and father. Thus you all make void the word of God through your tradition that you all have handed on. And you all do **many things** like this."

So, here's what is going on here.

"Honor your mother and your father" ... it's one of the 10 commandments. This isn't some fringe teaching like washing your hands ... it's core.

Now the word we translate as honor is the Hebrew *kavod*. The traditional meaning given to that is to feed and clothe your parents and to help them get around in their old age.

Now ... I want to pause for a second for an aside ... because this actually can be a really tricky commandment. On the surface, it absolutely makes sense. Everyone needs to be cared for in their old age. And ...our relationships with our parents can be fraught and complex. They range

from deeply loving to deeply toxic ... and the commandment to honor mother and father can be used to bind people to relationships that are not about giving life but are literally death producing.

That's where it's important to go to a deeper meaning of *kavod* and that is to guard the dignity of.

In Jewish tradition, part of the job of the parents was to hand down the tradition of God's love to the next generation. Because we are human, we do that imperfectly.

Where we have toxic relationships with parents, how we fulfill that commandment is by first of all, as best we can, NOT joining in and perpetuating the toxicity – which may mean actually not being in relationship with them. And ... even more ... it means as best we can to take whatever our parents have handed down to us and even just a little bit try to better shape it into something that looks like God's love for us to hand down to the next generation.

That's what honoring father and mother can be like in some of the very real, fraught relationships in our life.

OK ... back to the story. Remember, the traditional meaning of *kavod* is to feed and clothe your parents and to help them get around in their old age. And the religious leaders are saying, "A Korban – gift-offering [to God] is whatever support you might have had from me. Then, you all release them from any obligation for mother or father."

What's happening there is what the religious leaders have been telling people is: "You should take the money you would have used to care for your aging parents and instead give it to the church."

Now ... that actually might be OK if the church as a part of that was saying, "because caring for our elders is the job and joy of the whole community and together, we will share in that responsibility." That's actually the community to which we are called ... more on that in a minute.

But there was no Part B to this. It was just basically just "to heck with your parents ... give us the cash." And it's even worse because they were using their religious authority to tell people that God wanted them to do this.

Which brings me back to the thing that makes me go hmmmmm ... which is why this part got left out of the lectionary until, thank God, Dr. Gafney chose to toss it back in for us this morning.

Hmmmm ... why would the church leave this out?

Well, I wasn't in the room where that happened ... but I wonder.

I don't think it's because the extremes of this practice are actually widespread.

I think if Terry Knowles stepped up here during the announcements and said "for the 2022 giving campaign we're going to ask everyone to pledge whatever it is you were going to use to support your parents in their old age" – which, by the way, let me be clear Terry would *never* say – I think we would all be appropriately horrified and ... I don't think that's just an All Saints thing.

And .. what Jesus is talking about is the church – and people like me who stand in places like this -- using scripture to control and cast out rather than to liberate and embrace. What Jesus is talking about is the church using our power to define righteousness to prioritize our institutional survival over the actual living out of the love that is the whole reason for the church's existence.

In the extreme, it's the church telling parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer persons to turn their backs on them as a way of turning toward the church ... which, as we know all too painfully and well is NOT an uncommon practice.

And ... it's not just that.

It's we as the church demanding not just money but time not in ways that build up family relationships but to the detriment of family relationships.

It's we as the church caring more about the pledges coming in than the economic realities of those among us who are facing eviction or destitution or who are already there.

It actually is deeply related to the story of the rich young ruler that I referenced before ... because I wonder how much what is clearly an intentional editing out of this portion from the Gospel that is normally read in church ... I wonder how much that is about our inability to be honest about how far we are from obeying Jesus' commandment to give away all we have and trusting in God and the community providing maybe not all we want but all we need.

I wonder that because it's not the only place we have done this.

In our baptismal covenant, the first promise is: "Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers" ... which is all great ... but that's actually not something the prayer book folks thought up in the shower. That's from Acts 2 ... and what they left out was the part right before that ... the portion of that chapter we heard last week where it says: "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

Now ... it's too easy for us to do one of two things when we hear scripture like this morning's Gospel.

The first is to put ourselves in the place of Christ and feel superior.

The second is to put ourselves in the place of the religious leaders and feel shamed.

I believe there is a third way that is the way of life ... and that is to recognize that we are the religious leaders in this story AND ... that Jesus' goal in this conversation was actually not to shame them. He actually wasn't Mookie Betts smashing that hanging curveball into the left-field pavilion trying to defeat them and send them walking off the field with their head hanging down.

We *are* the religious leaders in this story .. I mean, I certainly am ... and really, all of us are. And I absolutely believe Jesus' attitude toward us then and us now is not to shame us but to love us.

To free us from the fear that leads to us using scripture to control instead of to liberate.

To free us from the very real fear that leads us to holding onto our wealth, which truly is our wealth holding on to us ... and instead to recognize our greatest security lies not in how much we have in the bank but in relationships where God's love is lived so profoundly we would never think to let anyone continue in need.

To free us from the very real fear of losing power and being discarded as we age that leads us to prevent younger generations from claiming the power that is rightfully theirs and instead to build a beloved community where, as Common rhymes:

*Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany
Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy*

This reading should convict us – it sure convicts me.

And it's OK for the Gospel to convict us. It doesn't mean we're bad people. In fact, we know we are not because we are all created in God's image as good and ain't nothing can ever change that. So we can let this reading convict us. And if it begins to shame us, then we can take Pema Chadron's counsel and ask the shame what it has to teach us and then let it go.

Because the truth is, what Jesus is talking to the religious leaders about ... we all do many things like this. And the answer isn't to hang our heads in shame. And it certainly isn't to edit it out of the lectionary and cherry pick a Gospel that is easy to live without changing our lives and then pretend we are more righteous than others for doing so. Ain't nothing revolutionary Jesus about that.

The answer ... in fact, it's not an answer. The *invitation* is to trust that we are loved beyond measure ... and that the fear that keeps us from loving God, neighbor and self as deeply is real ... and that God can love us, and we can love each other out of that fear.

The invitation is just to be honest about where we fall short of loving perfectly, trusting that the perfect love that casts our fear is right here waiting for us, and patiently letting Christ's love shape us into the very image of freedom. Amen.