

“The Guerilla Gospel”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
Wednesday of the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of Lent – 14 March 2007  
Mark 6:7-13

In every generation, the Body of Christ strives anew to articulate the Gospel in a way that is both faithful to God’s revelation and relevant to people’s lives. Those lives inevitably occur within a particular context, and that context is invariably fleeting. As much as we might prefer otherwise, things do change over time.

Even within the same era, what people experience may differ radically, depending upon where they have the fortune to be born. There are, in every culture and time, certain similarities – a smile is a smile no matter the year or the latitude. Music seems as universal and as ancient as language itself. But time and space do shape our experience inescapably, causing the emergence of fresh cultural realities.

For instance, two-hundred years ago in the United States, most women and almost all black people were considered property – no right to vote, or preach a sermon, for that matter. And not surprisingly, the Gospel preached to those people by and large conformed to that repressive reality, justifying slavery and the oppression of women with biblical proof texts.

Of course, much has changed for the better over the intervening years for both blacks and women, but not everywhere. There are cultures in the world that still practice slavery, and in many places, women are second-class citizens at best. Not surprisingly, a different Gospel gets preached in those places where women are considered incapable, unworthy to preach the Gospel or lead a congregation. Sadly, in this instance, I speak of

a majority of the provinces of the Anglican Communion, which persist in misogyny for the sake of the Gospel.

Mark, too, wrote to a particular people, ensconced within a specific place, time, and culture. He doesn't tell us precisely to whom he's writing, but whatever the exact group, we can make some inferences based upon what we know about his era and area.

The eastern Mediterranean basin in the first century A.D. was tumultuous, featuring border skirmishes with barbarian tribes and nascent rebellion within the Roman province of Judea. Both the barbarians and the revolutionaries of this period were regarded and treated in much the same way we regard and treat Islamic terrorists today.

Most people back then lived daily with gut-wrenching poverty. Most were ignorant and illiterate with little hope of upward mobility. They traveled in caravans to stay safe from bandits, who plundered property and occasionally kidnapped people, if they thought a ransom might be forthcoming. Except for a razor-thin elite at the top of society, life was largely nasty, brutish, and short.

The really depressing thing about the awful conditions they suffered is that for most people, things were much better than they had been in a long time, and unbeknownst to them, they were living in what would soon be considered a kind of golden age – the Pax Romana, a period of unusual stability that within a few centuries would begin a slow slide into what we now call the Dark Ages. Despite their comparative prosperity and safety, the people of the first century nevertheless lived what we would consider horribly insecure, unpredictable, dangerous, painful lives. The Pax Romana came at a steep price for most people, and the best fruits of the golden age were reserved for a precious few.

Into that context, Mark brought a message of hope, love, and peace, but how do you communicate that to people for whom hope, love, and peace may seem strange? The daily experience of the average person living in that time would have taught them little about what Mark had to say. He also practiced a religion significantly different from those most people practiced, which involved animal sacrifice or ritual orgies. You find either advocated in Mark's gospel. How do you break in and explain yourself to people who are so *not ready* to hear what you have to say?

Well, that's a problem that besets nearly every generation of Christians. Generally, folks have determined that the best way to communicate something people don't want to hear, the best way to exercise influence over people who don't want to be influenced, is to be subtle, to insinuate rather than provoke, to elicit the desired response via subterfuge. In a word, being subversive is the way to go, and what we get from Mark is nothing less than a guerilla Gospel, that subversively strives to persuade the hearer or the reader that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That can be hard to swallow, because we've been taught that subversives are dangerous people, which they are, and that they are always bad, which they are not. Some subversives are the good guys, just in the same way that the good guys occasionally dress in black.

One of the subversive tactics Mark uses is irony. Irony has long been the favorite of the satirist, and Mark deploys the device irony within his very first chapter. You may recall a few weeks ago, how we heard the first verses of Mark boldly proclaiming, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." But before the first chapter is finished, Jesus casts out a demon and commands the demon to remain silent and not reveal his identity.

The irony here should be obvious. Mark blurts out the secret in the first verse, but then throughout the first half of his gospel, Mark portrays Jesus as repeatedly urging those who recognize who he is to remain silent about it, to keep the secret. Many theories have been advanced as to why Mark did this, but the most incisive I have found is that this was Mark's way of telling the truth, while acknowledging the danger of doing so.

Being a Christian in Mark's day was dangerous. Christians suffered periodic persecutions, some organized by the government, others spontaneous local pogroms. But there's a deeper level to what Mark is doing. The danger is not just that you might be imprisoned and tortured, perhaps even exiled or killed, for following Jesus. The real hazard of knowing the secret of Jesus is that this secret is so powerful it might just turn your life upside down. When we consider Mark's context, we can see how true that would have been for the initial recipients of his message, and I contend that his gospel is no less dangerous and subversive today.

But let's consider the passage we heard read a few moments ago. How is that subversive? It seems so straightforward, and in a way, it is. Jesus commissions the twelve to go out two by two, just like the lion and the kangaroo boarded Noah's ark. But instead of going to the only safe place there was, like those animals of yore, Jesus was sending out his disciples to unknown, unsafe territory both figuratively and literally. Jesus even warned them to expect a chilly reception from some people, offering the disciples specific instructions on what to do when they and their message of the coming kingdom was rejected.

However, when we look at this brief passage within its broader scriptural context, what we discover is a continuing pattern of irony that contrasts the apparent power of Jesus' opponents with the apparent weakness of Jesus and his disciples.

Immediately prior to the passage we read tonight, Jesus had visited his hometown of Nazareth and had been hooted right out of the synagogue he grew up in. It must have been a humiliating experience, all those former friends and cousins criticizing him so fiercely, wondering out loud for all to hear, "who does Jesus think he is?!" After all, they knew him "back when," when he was a snot-nosed, pint-sized punk, and now he aspires to this position of authority and respect. No wonder Jesus warned the disciples about the reaction they could anticipate from many they would meet along the way.

Immediately after the commissioning and sending forth of the disciples, Mark relates the story of John the baptizer's execution at the hand of Herod. This story is abruptly concluded by Mark, who then goes on to tell of the disciples return from their journey, which was by their account tremendously successful. This is followed by the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, which in turn is followed by Jesus walking on the water and stilling the storm.

This double miracle is followed up in chapter seven by another conflict sequence, this time with the Pharisees, who were kind of the holy-rollers of first century Judaism. They had all the answers, and were happy to share them with you, along with a detailed analysis of all the things you were doing wrong, which is exactly what they did to Jesus in chapter seven. Of course, he gave as good as he got, making those pious little hypocrites look pretty stupid in the end.

After this run-in, Jesus did another couple of miracles: healing a deaf man (think Mark wants to link the healing of the deaf man to the Pharisees somehow?) and then Jesus performed another mass feeding, once again with very meager resources. This is rapidly followed up by a reappearance of those pesky Pharisees causing trouble. Then Jesus heals a blind man. Imagine that. And on and on it goes.

Do you see the pattern developing? Jesus gets into a fight with people who think they and they alone are right, and then does something amazing that proves his power, and usually that something is symbolically linked to what went before. He fights with Pharisees who won't listen, then heals a deaf man. He fights again with Pharisees who refuse to see who Jesus is, and then Jesus immediately heals a blind man. Coupled with the healings are two miraculous feedings, where thousands of people eat their fill, despite the paucity of available rations.

The message is clear. Those who hold the formal power, namely Herod and the Pharisees, are comparatively powerless when you look at what Jesus is doing. And what exactly is he doing? Jesus is healing people and feeding them. He is providing them with the practical necessities of life. In the case of those Jesus healed, he restored them to their position within the community. Opening more than just their ears or eyes, Jesus opened up entirely new vistas of opportunity for these people. The healing of the deaf and the blind represented not only the Pharisees and their spiritual insensitivity, but also the vast majority of the people, who were disempowered by Rome and by the religious elites who were collaborating with the occupying legions of Rome.

People may say the Gospel of Jesus Christ isn't political. But the way Mark tells, with his subversive irony, the Gospel becomes political, because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about people, and politics is about people – or at least it should be.

What do think Mark is saying about Jesus in relation to the religious big-wigs and the imperial rulers of his day? What message do you think Mark is trying to get across to the people suffering under arrogant, corrupt religious leaders and ruthless tyrants? What enduring truth do you think Mark may have for us today?

What we're doing here is discernment of a biblical text; we are "sifting through," which is what discernment literally means, we are "sifting through" in order to penetrate the surface and find the deeper meaning. But you've got to dig. We dig and sift through the dusty text until the diamonds start popping out. It's hard work, but it's worth it, because what we come up with is both true and relevant, and it goes a long way past being polite.

You see, ever since the beginning, and even now, people have gotten killed over this thing we call Gospel, starting with Jesus, and including most of his original disciples, and those people weren't murdered because Jesus thought it would be nice if everybody were nice for a change. People get killed over this Gospel because it says things about God's mercy that powerful people don't want to hear. It says things about forgiveness and generosity that mean people don't want to hear. It says things about what is possible and preferable that narrow-minded people don't want to hear. And it's this gospel, this message of hope and deliverance and salvation and reconciliation and love and liberty that Jesus sent the original twelve disciples out to share in word and deed.

Just as we share in the body and blood, just as we share in all the riches of God's grace, so we share in the mission of being sent forth to share a gospel that turns the world upside down and sets it on fire. It is a gospel that is applicable, not only to the personal piety of individual believers, but also a gospel fully relevant to public policy. And what the Gospel of Jesus Christ says -- as told by Mark in his wonderfully subversive way -- is Yes and No.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ says NO to empires like Rome that seek to dominate and exploit and oppress and destroy, and if we are faithful witnesses to that Gospel, so will we. The Gospel of Mark says NO to self-appointed religious elites who pretend to have all the answers and who seem to be always against people and ideas, but rarely *for* anyone but themselves. And we should say NO, too.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ says YES to people who are hungry and hurting, both spiritually and physically. The Gospel says YES to people possessed by powers beyond their control who want to be free. The Gospel says YES to the outcasts and the misfits, and so should we.

The context changes, but in many ways the more things change, the more they remain the same. What remains always true is the heart of this Gospel, alive today, waiting to be carried into the world by disciples like us. It's a guerrilla gospel, subversive to the core, out to win hearts and minds, out to overturn injustice and cruelty and apathy. And it's as dangerous as dynamite. Have we got the guts to take such a gospel away from this place and into a world that may not want to hear it? I hope so, and I think so. So let's do it. Amen.