

Greatness

The problem with working through a Gospel in small increments is that you begin to sound like a broken record. For the better part of two chapters, Mark has been unfolding the theme that Jesus is trying to teach his disciples that what he is up to is going to lead to a cross and a tomb rather than a shining victory. The more he tries to get that idea through to them, the more they insist upon their own wrong ideas. He tells them about the little ones, and the last and the least and the necessity of being a servant, yet here they are, still trying to get the places of honor. Not just James and John either, the other ten were pretty upset with them when they heard that, because they probably wanted the same honor. Apparently realizing that the examples of little ones and the reproof of materialism, and his insistence that the road to the kingdom leads down rather than up, and that the suffering of the cross is going to be necessary on the road to glory, Jesus is finally pretty blunt with his disciples.

What he says here is important, for them and for us. "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones become tyrants over them." I think when Jesus uses the word Gentiles here, he is not just talking about non-Israelites. The Greek word is *ethnoi*, which you might recognize from the cognate "ethnic." A better situational translation might be "the nations," or even "the world," because let's face it the leaders of Israel could become tyrants as much as any gentile. In fact, they were all living under Herod, who was a pretty darn good example of a tyrant and brutal power mongering, despite the fact that he was Jewish. Jesus is pushing a change in how the disciples see things, he is encouraging them to look past the divisions that they see as so unavoidable, and find the Kingdom. They're not there yet, but they're on their way. All of this stuff they learn from him is like a time bomb. While they still have him there, they manage to hold onto their delusions, and he knows this, but when everything plays out they remember these things and they begin to act accordingly.

I guess after almost two months of crawling over these lessons, I'm going to ask you to accept that the Kingdom of God does not operate at all like the "gentile" world. I'm going to ask you to recognize that questions about who is the greatest, who gets the seats of honor and such are vain and futile at the same time. I'm going to fall back on the knowledge that "little ones" are the greatest and successful, powerful and rich people are sent away grieving. And I'm going to try and angle towards why that is and why it must be the case in the Kingdom of God. Why is the cross the only way? Why can't there be some glorious victory and a life of eternal bliss? Why can't we just decide on our places and bask in God's presence?

I think it starts with suffering. Suffering happens to all of us in some form or another, and if we do not somehow deal with that suffering, we will simply pass it on. People who live with abuse mostly learn how to be abusive, people who live with violence learn how to be more violent, unless something breaks the cycle. Richard Rohr, in his devotions for this week, used the analogy of electricity: most people are just relay switches for suffering, they just pass on what they get to the next part of the circuit, but some people, people who even partly apprehend what Christ is about, know that they need to be transformers, that can alter the nature of that suffering and perhaps even redeem it somehow.

The "gentiles" simply perpetuate the systems of power, greed and violence that come so easily to our species. They do not, they cannot, change the nature of the system, Jesus is inviting his disciples to do something different. Instead of climbing and clawing and trying to win, maybe take a different approach, notice the little ones, humble yourself and serve, even if it means following Jesus right into

teeth of that broken and brutal system that we often just call “the world.” By the logic of the world, if you really want to make things better you need power, you need control, you need things you do not have. To obtain those things you mostly have to take them from other people, and in doing so you inevitably cause suffering. The secret and diabolical trap in this is that you usually cause your own suffering as well as that of those from whom you take power, control and resources, because none of those things are ever enough, that shadow side of Mammon is a real bear.

This is why Jesus turns everything upside down: the way is not about power, it is about surrender; the way is not about wealth it is about sacrifice; the great are not the blessed, the meek are the blessed; the powerful are not blessed, the little ones are blessed. Again, this is not exactly hidden in the fine print, this is pretty “in your face,” throughout the Gospels. So why do we insist on going back to arguing about seating arrangements in heaven?

I think it makes more sense to us, the idea of a meritocracy. From a certain perspective the world rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness, at least that’s what people tend to want to believe. Except it is demonstrably not true, justice is actually rare and fleeting. Good people suffer and wicked people prosper, the rain falls on the fields of the just and the unjust alike. Jesus does not change that, no matter what triumphalist forms of Christianity might tell you, Jesus suffers it, and by absorbing the injustice and brutality of his own people and the betrayal of his best friend, he comes through.

In a story told by the principles of the kingdom of the world, Jesus would have risen from the dead and came back to torment and kill all the people that had a hand in his brutal execution, from the centurions, to Pilate, to Annas and Caiphus and Judas, maybe even Peter for denying him, but that is decidedly not what Jesus does. He was in a prime position to go all Charles Bronson on the wicked, but instead he forgives them, because his resurrection happens in the context of the Kingdom of God, not the kingdom of the world. He breaks the circuit of suffering and refuses to transfer his pain on to others. He forgives, he serves, he does not seek vengeance, he is our example of what greatness really is.