

Don't Trust a 2 Handed Biblical 'Literalist' | Jesus' Challenge to Community Solidarity

[Mark 9](#) | Knox-Metropolitan United Church

Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory | September 26, 2021 | Cameron Fraser

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

And that is why it is said that one should never trust a two-handed biblical literalist.

Our reading today, from the Gospel of Mark, includes a few of Jesus' most memorable, and, I would argue, prone to misunderstanding, sayings.

First it's the hand, then the foot, and then the eye!

It sort of grates against the oft stated summary that Jesus was just such a nice person

Who wants us to be nice as well.

Trying to wrestle meaning out of a passage like this, I'd suggest, invites us to ask some high level questions.

What is Jesus seeking to do in his teaching?

We might also phrase that question, as what is Mark's Jesus seeking to do, recognizing that the text as we receive it, is composed, edited, compiled, and the action of the human author and the author's community and audience is pretty key in asking these questions.

Often this question is answered, implicitly, without recognition that the reader is asking and answering this, as Jesus, as a singular religious figure, is seeking undivided devotion and personal piety, and by extension, moral purity.

In such a reading, Jesus' exhortation to cut off your hand is, even among literalists, never understood to be literal

In such readings, this is about seeking moral purity, as a sign of devotion to Jesus.

Tragically, this interpretive framework embeds itself within a moral framework which is then imposed on the text despite it coming from a drastically different historical and cultural context.

Which is often part and parcel of an exclusivist ideology, stigmatizing sexuality and addiction, and from there creating an image of purity too often used as a tool of maintaining power

Rather than to empower people to live into their fullest potential.

What if instead we understand the Gospels, and by extension, Jesus as teacher in the Gospels, as seeking to develop community consciousness.

Specifically, what if the Gospels are not seeking to prove Jesus' supremacy as a religious figure, but about seeking to build literacy and capacity within a historic movement seeking to address the spiritual/societal dynamics of inequality amidst a moment of crisis, challenging pervasive understandings.

Read in this way, what sort of wisdom might we find in these texts?

Or perhaps we might better frame this question as wondering what sort of inner wisdom, or communal wisdom, comes when we reflect on our own situations, personally and communally in the light of these texts?

In this way Scriptures, as Ched Myers notes, can be both a window and a mirror.

Scripture invites us to see new things about the world from which they emerge, while also challenging us to see the same dynamics working in our own world, communities and even selves.

This episode which we've heard this morning is a continuation of what was explored last week with Jesus' challenging of a tendency to upwards aspiration and instead an invitation to downward solidarity and a communal ethic of care for the most vulnerable.

<https://youtu.be/aQNmqp9oJ-4?t=1627>

https://mcusercontent.com/a0f92b629ef5d45b6f7677645/files/b1f2d90b-46d6-5fd3-316b-18e4042bd47f/Sermon_September_19.pdf

There's a lot happening here.

Just a few weeks after Peter memorably misses the point, it is now John who places his foot in his mouth.

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'

Interesting that John notes that this anonymous exorcist was not following "us" rather than not following "you" indicating that the lessons of greatness and self-emptying are not being absorbed.

Then we come to first of Jesus' shocking statements.

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.'

In the Greek language this was written we get a neat little alliteration.

these little ones

mikron

Which is contrasted with the argument (from the preceding passage) about who is the greatest

Greatest

Meizon

The Meizon or the Mikron, towards which shall we aspire, towards which shall we offer our attention?

Jesus' reference to *these little ones* makes sense when we remember that the action that ended the previous passage was Jesus bringing a child into the midst of the group.

This is often sentimentalized, but I'd suggest we best understand it as an object lesson in who is the most vulnerable, and this would mean that Jesus' millstone image is rooted in the inclusion or exclusion of those within the community who are the most vulnerable.

So what's with Jesus' suggestion about millstones, sea, casting and hand/foot/eye cutting?

Such rhetorical fervor imbues this social analysis with a sense of urgency.

In Jesus' time poverty and lack were not simply unfortunate, but were indeed life or death circumstances.

It is not hard in our own context amidst a constant stream of images and stories to numb to the seriousness of homelessness and financial precarity, racial inequality, and ecological catastrophe.

Jesus' use of such hard imagery might also convey a seriousness and centrality.

The lives of Mark's listeners were living through a time of intense social change and crisis. The second Jewish Roman War and the siege of Jerusalem were the backdrop of inner conflict within the communities of Israel, infighting and disagreements about what to do in the face of these cataclysmic events were wide-spread.

Does Mark's Jesus here seek to cut through the noise to catch the attention of the audience?

This is certainly consistent with the Hebrew prophets to whom Jesus is often compared.

Another possibility is that Mark's Jesus is seeking to refocus the conversation about what is of ultimate importance.

It is amidst the second Jewish Roman war that the idea of a hereafter begins to enter Hebrew thought, which is sort of understandable. The community is facing something incomprehensible...the possible destruction of the temple, or if Mark is written after 67CE, the destruction realized. This leads to an existential crisis – how can this be, God's own earthly seat in ruins?

Out of this crisis, the idea that perhaps this world is not the end, but actually the foreshadowing or even anteroom of a more ultimate reality, begins to enter Jewish thought.

Olam Ha-Ba *The World to Come*.

There is of course many different threads of early Jewish teachings that pick this up.

There is the idea that the world to come is a messianic possibility to be created out of the stuff of the present in this temporal reality, akin to a declaration that *Another World is Possible*.

But there is also beginning to develop an otherworldly idea.

It's sometimes challenging to wrap ones head around the idea that an otherworldly afterlife is not at the centre of the Biblical imagination from page one, but in fact, I would suggest, is something of a live debate.

Does Mark's Jesus here employ such ideas as a way to refocus attention to the needs of the moment among those members of the community who had given up on this world and placed their hope in an afterlife.

Another possibility is that the author is having Jesus tap into imagery of the body as a stand in for the community.

This trend in early Christian thinking is most readily seen in the teachings of Paul of Tarsus, the Apostle Paul.

<https://bible.oremus.org/?ql=499522208>

It is almost certain that Paul's letters have been written and circulated by the time Mark is being compiled, although it is impossible to say how widely.

It's also very possible that the metaphor of community as body is one that exists beyond Paul's work.

This brings a very interesting possibility into the reading of this passage.

Following this metaphor, Mark's Jesus can be calling the community to be attentive to how their community and others within it are affecting the lives of those they should be protecting.

This is a radical challenge to communal solidarity.

Is this then about extending ideas of community, to whom are we connected, and to whom do we owe attention and care? This would indeed be a radically challenging idea consistent with the societal breakdown being experienced within the community.

It is certainly a challenge to our notions today, isn't it, where we often relate to the discomfort of need and lack with what Ched Myers calls surrogates to solidarity – charity, paternalism, and control.

The imagery that ends this passage of salt and a call to peace.

Salt is an important commodity in the Ancient Hebrew world and throughout the Mediterranean peninsula and is therefore used to ratify agreements, and exchanged as a sign of peace.

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Jesus wraps up this exhortation to moral clarity and depth of commitment to the vulnerable, even if it causes fracture in the community, with a call to work towards peace.

A moral clarity and ferocity that questions whether those who lack mercy have a place in the community, is held on the other side with a call to restorative justice...an idea reflected throughout the Gospel of Mark in Jesus' befriending and sharing table fellowship with tax collectors, a group whose opportunistic response to the crisis of Roman occupation is fracturing their community.

Mark's Jesus seems to hold in tension an uncompromising commitment to the end exploitation by those with power and influence, with an unending commitment to hold community in peace and find ways to keep community turned towards one another.

There is no expendable person in this ethos, and yet this is not about overlooking harm for unity's sake.

If we're open to seeing it, Mark's day is a lot like our own, in terms of the contours of some of the great communal challenges, albeit with different causes.

The stakes were high and the challenges heavy.

The impact of the external circumstances of the Roman Occupation boiling over in the Jewish Roman war and the siege of Jerusalem threw the present into instability and the future into question.

Existing inequalities become exasperated as resources become limited and traditional bonds are stretched and strained, so many situations feeling like a zero sum gain. If only this path was followed or that action taken on, this pervasive problem would be solved. If only this group would stop this or start that, we'd all be better off.

Somehow in the midst of this, Mark's Jesus calls for clarity of conviction to be held with restorative relationships.

How does a community function in the midst of the fear of the unknown (and the knowns), in the midst of the grief of what is lost and the constant stress, mixed with the pain of disconnection and community fracture and a longing to reach across what seems like insurmountable difference and moral compromise.

Here's the thing though.

Mark's Jesus is not offering a simple solution but an exhortation to engage and rejection of a binary either or.

It is not community cohesion at the expense of protection of the most vulnerable nor is it a casual discarding or setting aside of those who disagree.

This is all, of course, set amidst Jesus program of teaching of what he names as taking up one's own cross, a path of kenosis which is sometimes translated as self-emptying, but might be better described a making space for another in a way that manages to not diminish the self.

So if this is not in fact about reaching and maintain a simulacrum of moral purity (which usually hides an aspiration to superiority and subjugation) but about a challenging ethic of restorative community solidarity and commitment it becomes much harder to embody than following a list of certain so-called deviant behaviours in which one should not engage.

This is challenge to our very encultured tendencies to aspire upwards toward meizon – greatness while avoiding being sullied by the *mikron* which offend sensibilities, respectability, and tarnish reputation.

This is a challenge to bring a depth of ethical commitment to the very complicated challenges of a time of crisis, while building restorative and restoring relationship recognizing that challenges of immense proportion require more than just the easily convinced.

Jesus teaching in the book of Mark moves from the theoretical, the high level *Who do you say I am* and from there into the complexity of human community and relationships, all the while the narrative moves the action closer to Jerusalem, the nexus of crisis for the community.

As we journey with Jesus in these coming weeks, we don't encounter a simple three step process for responding to the call of times of collective crisis and confusion, but instead are invited to open up to the possibilities of emergence. I pray that these offerings might become the beginning of our collective wondering and imagining, for they cannot possibly be the last word, the rest is up to you...