

Mark: Forming Disciples for the Way of Peace

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The invitation to write about my experiences while learning and telling the Gospel of Mark by heart reminds me of an invitation found in “The Godfather”: “Let me make you an offer you can’t refuse.” Since learning and telling Mark by heart has probably been my most significant life-changing experience, I know of no way to respond without also providing some autobiographical context. This, then, is a confessional essay in the tradition of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine about what I have learned about Mark, about Jesus, and about God through this paradigm-altering experience.

The initial impulse to learn Mark by heart came in the research stage of my dissertation on Mark’s passion-resurrection narrative at Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York in the summer of 1970. I had been an inner-city pastor in black and Latino churches in New York and Chicago in the mid-sixties and actively involved in the civil rights movement. The spring of 1968 was the spring of the student protests and the occupation of Columbia University across the street to the east, which had a major impact on UTS. Then, in the spring of 1969, I participated in the student protest at UTS in response to the Black Manifesto by James Forman at Riverside Church across the street to the west. That summer I wrote my first published article, “The Rich and the Poor in

Theological Education” (*Motive*, February, 1970). These were revolutionary times.

My purpose in the dissertation was to study Mark’s passion-resurrection narrative as a narrative. The first stage of any dissertation is to do a survey of other writings on the topic. Most of the previous studies began with a source analysis of the pre-Markan passion narrative. This involved an identification of the seams between the earlier sources and Mark’s editorial additions. However, the more I read, the more I was discouraged, because I was not learning anything about Mark as a unified narrative. In fact, many of the books I was reading clearly had as their goal the deconstruction of Mark’s story. One day, surrounded by all of my books on Mark, I asked God what to do. I heard what I experienced as God’s voice, “Put away the books. Get your guitar, learn the passion narrative by heart in Greek, and chant it.” Whether or not it was God’s voice, it was certainly a radically new methodological approach to Mark that I had never previously conceived.

It took me most of a month to learn the story in Greek, in part because there were so many questions that the whole process raised. How should I pronounce the words—in the Erasmian pronunciation I had learned in my initial study of Greek or in modern Greek pronunciation so that someone who spoke Greek could

understand the story? I finally decided to learn it with the pronunciation I had already mastered in order to save time. What rhythms and tones should I use for the chant? I consulted the tropes of Hebrew and Byzantine chant, and they gave me some guidance. In the end, however, I improvised my own chant. Learning two and a half chapters of Koine Greek by heart proved to be a formidable task.

That experience changed my perception of Mark. First, I learned almost immediately that Mark was structured for learning by heart. There were verbal threads that linked the story together: parallel beginnings and endings to subsequent episodes; words that were repeated in later stories such as Jesus' prophecy of the disciples' flight and Peter's denial and the subsequent stories of those events; and words from earlier stories in the Gospel such as the passion prophecies, the feedings, and Jesus' dialogues with his disciples. Furthermore, I found that the stories were structured in what I came to call "episodes," units of two or three periods (sentences) in Greek. Recognizing those features of the story was immensely helpful in learning the story.

I also learned that the passion narrative was a truly passionate narrative that evoked strong emotions and intense dynamics. The contrast between the way in which the story was usually read and what emerged from the recital of the story by heart was huge. There were times when I was simply overwhelmed by the feelings that the story expressed. I would find myself weeping or engaged in deep self-examination. The internalization of the story completely changed my relationship with the story. Instead of being an outside observer studying the story in the text on my desk, the story was a vivid, living experience. The psychological distance between myself and the story disappeared so that the story was no longer an object that I

was examining but a subject examining me. Instead of my asking questions of the text, the story was asking questions of me.

Another dimension of the experience was the contrast between the way in which I had previously heard the story and what emerged from learning and telling it by heart. I had heard stories from Mark's passion narrative read in worship services. There was even a worship service on Good Friday when I had heard the whole story read at one time. That had been a moving experience. However, the contrast between that story and the story I was learning was enormous. The earlier readings I had heard were emotionally detached and objective. There was little or no passion in the voices. The story was initially interesting but, after a time, boring. It was inconceivable that the whole Gospel could have been read in this manner and that it would hold an audience's attention for more than two hours. The readers read well, but I had little sense of their own engagement with the story.

This story I was learning and telling was raw by comparison. In the story of Jesus' crucifixion, there was restraint in the description of the details of this execution but the sheer scandal of what was happening was shocking. Throughout the story, I found myself feeling implicated in Jesus' death. This story touched nerves and exposed the radical alienation from God that was implicit in the action of Pilate, the chief priests, and the people. The disciples with whom I identified were fully complicit in Jesus' dying alone. It was as if I had never heard the story before, even though I was intimately familiar with it. In fact, I had written my master's thesis on the use of Psalm 23 in the passion narratives of the Gospels. However, this was a new thing.

The experience of telling Mark's story to others was no less surprising. In retrospect, I have sympathy for my first hearers. How would you feel if this over-the-top

storytelling maniac was chanting this story to you in Greek? The first person to whom I told the story was my fellow graduate student, Gil Bartholomew. He had taught the introduction to Greek course at UTS for a couple of years and was a good Greek scholar. Nevertheless, he could understand only fragments of the story, because he had never heard it told before and had certainly never heard it chanted. Yet even though he barely understood the words, he was deeply moved, as well as puzzled, by the story.

The first time that I told a story in worship was in a chapel service at Union the following spring. Dr. Reginald Fuller had heard me tell a couple of stories and asked me to tell the Emmaus appearance story for a service during Eastertide. I remember that service vividly and how much anxiety I had about standing on the open platform rather than behind the lectern and addressing the congregation directly. The story immediately got people's attention and I could tell that they were listening more attentively than they would have listened to a reading. There was a sense of experiencing the original event, of being there on the road, of Jesus breaking the bread, and of their telling the eleven what had happened. People commented on that after the service. The response of the group, mainly other students, was universally positive, even though some were uncertain about its liturgical appropriateness. This was also the first time that I heard the most frequent response over the years: "It made the Scripture more alive."

Since then I have told biblical stories to thousands of people all over the world in a wide variety of contexts: workshops, lectures, worship services, pastoral visits, in churches, hospitals, prisons, and open air gatherings. The responses have varied greatly. The great majority of people respond to the recital of the Scriptures by heart with warmth and enthusiasm. A small minority don't like it. Negative

responses I remember include: "too intense," "too much in my face," and "calls too much attention to the person telling."

In recent years, I have encouraged congregations to form "Scripture by Heart" groups and to tell all of the Scriptures by heart. After observing the extremely low level of engagement and listening in most congregations to Scripture readings, I have concluded that the recital of Scripture by heart creates a higher degree of listening and response. I first initiated this at Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton four years ago. From the first week until now, the response from the congregation and the tellers has been universally positive, with not one negative response. Scripture by heart is now one of the things that Grace advertises about its worship, and visitors regularly comment on the vitality of the Scriptures at Grace. The Grace by Heart group now includes about twenty individuals and continues to grow. The same is true of all the congregations in which this practice has been initiated: Protestant and Catholic, liberal and conservative. I strongly recommend the proclamation of the Scriptures by heart to every congregation.

The degree to which this experience of learning Mark by heart would affect my personal life only became clear in the events that followed the completion of my dissertation in the spring of 1974. On November 9 of that year I was hit by a car at a filling station on the Bronx River Parkway in New York. I was standing in back of another car waiting to talk to the attendant and a car came off the parkway and was unable to stop. Both of my legs were severely fractured, though fortunately not crushed, between the two cars. I was in casts for six months and out of work for a year. During that year, I found that the stories I knew by heart were great gifts to me in the process of recovery. The story

of the healing of the paralytic in particular was a story that I remembered and told myself many times. Indeed, the word “remember” came to have a new significance for me as I slowly and painfully regained the use of my lower members. There was a close connection between remembering this story and the process of learning to walk again. Jesus’ forgiveness of the shame associated with my new paralysis and his invitation/command to get up and walk were a steady source of energy to me.

Part of what I learned in that experience was the dynamic of the memory of sacred stories. One of the side effects of strong pain medication is involuntary sleep. I often could not read for more than ten minutes without falling asleep. Watching TV would usually keep me awake; but TV in general and daytime TV in particular was depressing. It was difficult to find a source of encouragement and energy in the outside world. This was particularly intense during the long nights of sleeplessness and the long hours of painful rehabilitation exercises. The main resources I had in those times were the things in my memory: songs, prayers, and the stories from Mark that I had learned by heart during my dissertation research on Mark. My memory was the one thing that could cut through the pain. I found that the stories that I knew virtually word for word from Mark were uniquely associated with God for me. Remembering the stories and re-experiencing them in my imagination was one of the ways in which I could feel and know God’s presence.

After returning to teaching, I realized that I wanted my students to have this resource for themselves. I began to explore the ways in which I as a teacher could enable others to learn the stories by heart. In the fall of 1976, I led my first biblical storytelling workshop at an opening retreat for the new S.T.M. group at New York

Theological Seminary. That workshop on Mark’s story of the paralytic—no surprise there—was a transformative experience. The students were energized by the process and surprised at how meaningful it was to learn and tell the story and to connect it with experiences of their own paralysis—physical and metaphorical.

Within the next year I, along with my colleague Gil, initiated the Network of Biblical Storytellers. That organization has steadily grown through the years and is now an international community with active groups in Australia, Africa, Asia, and Canada. I have personally done storytelling workshops all over the United States and around the world. The Network has enabled thousands of people to learn and tell biblical stories. I have learned from this that there is great energy in enabling others to learn and to tell the stories themselves.

All of this has been a great surprise to me. I remember asking myself while I was doing my research on Mark, “I wonder what would happen if we just told the stories?” I could never have imagined how much of an impact it would have. Thus, another thing I have learned is the multiplying power of the stories. There are now biblical storytellers all over the world. My hunch is that this was true to a much greater degree in the historical context of the first century. The phenomenal growth of early Christian Judaism is a historical fact that is inexplicable if the primary storytelling tradition of the Gospels were directed to the small communities of those who already believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Groups that only tell stories to themselves do not grow.

In addition to the new possibilities, the process of learning and telling Mark by heart has also created a new set of problems. The first and most persistent problem has been that Mark’s story is very different when it is analyzed as a

performed story rather than as a text read by readers. I experienced this very early on in the first draft of my dissertation. In a chapter of conclusions, I wrote about three central issues in Markan interpretation: the purpose of the characterization of the disciples, the question of whether or not the Pilate trial was anti-Jewish polemic, and the possibility or impossibility of the ending at 16:8.

Regarding the characterization of the disciples, students of Norman Perrin had developed a Chicago school of Markan interpretation. A representative product of that school was Theodore Weeden's book *Mark: Traditions in Conflict*. These studies shared the conclusion that Mark's purpose in his highly negative characterization of the disciples was theological critique. Weeden argued that the purpose of the highly negative characterization of the disciples was to criticize the *theios aner* (divine man) Christology that the disciples represented. Werner Kelber's later book *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1984) extended this argument and concluded that Mark's purpose in creating a written gospel was to critique the oral gospel with which the disciples and particularly Peter were associated. Regarding the possible anti-Judaism of the Gospel, a prevalent reading of the Pilate trial has been that a primary purpose of the characterization of the Jews and their role in Jesus' death was anti-Jewish polemic. Regarding the ending, there was a widely held conclusion that 16:8 could not have been the intended ending of Mark, because its description of the women saying nothing was too negative.

In response to each of these three controversies, I argued that an analysis of Mark's story *as a narrative that was heard* revealed patterns of storytelling rhetoric that provided new perspectives. For example, when told and analyzed as a story, Mark's characterization of the disciples

combines highly sympathetic dynamics of distance with frequent mistakes in the disciples' responses culminating in their running away at the arrest and in Peter's denial. The purpose of this is to involve the listeners with these mistakes in order to invite them to reflect on these responses in themselves. They are not led to reject the disciples. Rather, hearers are led by the narrative to identify with the disciples in a way that would enable them to address the failures of the disciples as potential failings in themselves.

Such an analysis paralleled that of the characterization of "the crowd," which is highly sympathetic and invites the listening audience to identify with the crowd in its enthusiastic response to Jesus. The crowd's sudden demand for Jesus' crucifixion and the release of Barabbas subsequently "implicates" the audience in this demand. The narrative purpose is to involve the audience in this action of the crowd. I later named this narrative strategy a "rhetoric of implication"—a strategy that implicates the audience in the death of Jesus. Far from being anti-Jewish, the narrative involves the hearer in the reactions of the crowd so that the audience could deal with the reactions of the crowd within themselves.

This same rhetorical structure of sympathetic involvement with a character who does something radically wrong is present also in the ending at 16:8. The women are highly sympathetic characters who are Jesus' only friends at his death and burial. When they flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone in response to the angel's command to tell the disciples that Jesus is risen, it is a supremely surprising ending that invites the audience to reflect on their response to the angel's command to "go tell." Will the hearers also be afraid as the women were or will they have the courage to go and tell?

These three elements of Mark's story have similar characteristics that are misperceived when the story is read as a text in silence. When heard as dimensions of a story told to audiences, they have a consistent and significantly different meaning.

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Furthermore, the dynamics of the Markan storyteller's address to the audience revealed that the audience was almost always addressed as Jews. The one exception to this dominant pattern is Mark's explanation of Jewish purity traditions in 7:2–3 that is clearly directed to non-Jews. The structure of the plot is based on Jesus' suffering and death being a reversal of the audience's expectations. If that is the case, Mark addresses his audience as individuals who do not already believe that Jesus is the Messiah. That is, the evidence from the story indicates that Mark addresses his audience as Jews who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The dominant purpose of the story is not an anti-Jewish polemic. Rather, it is designed to invite his Jewish listeners to believe and to become disciples.

My dissertation committee found these conclusions unacceptable and indefensible. During the ensuing two years of

searching for a way to save my dissertation, I finally concluded that the foundational problem was that there was no way for my committee to experience Mark in its original medium. In the absence of that experience, my admittedly radical conclusions had no validity. I decided to resubmit my dissertation as a 350-page rhetorical analysis of Mark's passion and resurrection narrative with the only conclusion being that it was possible to analyze Mark's narrative as a narrative. That was approved.

This was an existential crisis in which I learned that changing the medium in which Mark is experienced is very difficult. In the years since that experience, I have concluded that learning and telling Mark as a story is a paradigm shift that changes everything in Markan scholarship. What is true for Mark is equally true for the other "books" of the Bible. They were all composed orally to be performed for audiences rather than read in silence by readers. However, the assumption of *the reader* is virtually universal in historical critical biblical scholarship.

From my earlier experience, I knew that simply writing articles or books on this topic was insufficient. In order to address this problem, therefore, I finally concluded that a way forward might be to establish a research group that would investigate the media of the Bible in its ancient and modern context. It took two years of lobbying the program committee of the Society of Biblical Literature to get approval to have a consultation to see whether there was a sufficient number of scholars who were interested in this topic. The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media group was a consultation for two years (rather than the usual one year), then a research group for several years, and finally it became an established section after more than ten years. Changing the medium of biblical interpretation is a big

project. Nevertheless, this research group has had a major impact on changing the dominant paradigm. A recent step in that process of change has been the launching of “performance criticism” by David Rhoads.

What then was the meaning of the Markan storyteller’s story to its first-century audiences? What impact did this story have? If the original audiences of Mark’s Gospel were Jews and Gentiles in the early 70s as is implied by the apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13, the story of Jesus was heard in the context of the disastrous consequences of the Roman-Jewish war. The people of Israel had chosen the way of Barabbas rather than the way of Jesus. They had chosen to maintain separation and hostility toward the Gentiles rather than to do good for their enemies as Jesus did in his healing and feeding of Gentiles (for example, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter, and the feeding of the 4000 from the Decapolis) as well as Jews.

In contrast to the military traditions of the Messiahs of Israel such as Saul and David, Jesus killed no one and taught his disciples to preach and heal. He did not form an army to attack the enemies of Israel but instead defeated the powers of evil by his actions and teaching. His proclamation of the kingdom of God transcended the conflicts between Israel and the nation states of the Gentiles and redefined its meaning as an inclusive spiritual realm. Most striking of all, he modeled non-violent resistance to the powers of this evil age by his suffering and death. Jesus’ way of peace was vindicated by God in his resurrection. The good news of the Gospel was that God had sent a Messiah who would save the world from the powers of evil—the powers of hatred, violence, and warfare. Mark’s story was an appeal to his audiences to believe in Jesus as a non-violent Messiah. In the context of the period following the

Judean war against Rome from 66 to 70 C.E., Mark’s good news was a clear and powerful alternative to the way of warfare the nation had chosen.

Mark’s story also redefined what it meant to be a follower of the Messiah. In the tradition of Israel and in the most popular story of the ancient world (Homer’s epic story of the war between Greece and Troy), to be a hero meant to become a warrior and take up a sword and follow a great leader such as Alexander the Great into battle. In Mark’s story, becoming a disciple of the Messiah meant taking up your cross and following Jesus into non-violent battle against the spiritual powers of evil. A primary impact of the passion narrative is also a matter of identifying with the disciples as they face their own resistance to following Jesus’ way, namely, fear of suffering and death. Mark’s story invites his audiences to reflect on their own resistance to following Jesus’ way of non-violence. Somehow, it is easier to face death in warfare killing others than it is to face death non-violently for the sake of others.

Thus, Mark’s evangelism is not primarily focused on the salvation of individual souls and accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. Nor is it focused on the theological issues of the triune manifestations of God or the relationship of Jesus’ humanity and divinity. Mark’s evangelism is directed to the conversion of human beings to Jesus’ way of peace. The need for that kind of evangelism is thoroughly contemporary in a digital age in which we are overwhelmed by images and appeals to violence and warfare as the way by which we will be saved from our enemies and the powers of evil. The Christian churches, the nation states of the world, and, in particular, the United States of America need to hear and to be convinced of Mark’s good news. This has been my deepest learning from knowing and telling Mark by heart.