

Renovating Power: Embodying Jesus' New Way

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When I was in seminary, my first New Testament professor, David Tiede, suggested that we choose one of the four Gospels to relate to in an on-going way throughout our pastoral life. He spoke of his long relationship with the Gospel of Luke and how that Gospel continued to unfold new mysteries to him even after decades of rigorous engagement. I have followed his advice with the oldest of the four Gospels, Mark. Like many of the readers of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, I have spent time with Mark every three years since my baptism as an infant. In seminary my knowledge of the evangelist's message deepened. But our friendship went to a whole new level when I committed to taking its mysteries to heart in order to perform them for others. Every day for sixteen months, I spent a half hour over morning coffee internalizing Mark's narrative. This relationship has brought us together at such a deep level that it is hard for me to untangle where my own thinking ends and where Mark's begins. As with other deep friendships I have enjoyed throughout the years, I find myself finishing Mark's sentences for him, but more surprising is that he occasionally returns the favor for me.

At the heart of Mark's gospel is renovating power. In a context where the Roman Empire sought to control how power would be understood and experienced, the evangelist re-imagined what power was and how it could be used. Mark's Jesus overtly

teaches this renovated, renovating form of power.

You know that those considered to be rulers over the Gentile nations dominate them and their great ones are tyrants over them, but it's not like this among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be most important among you will be a slave of all. Because even the Human One came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.¹

This revision of power in terms of service toward others and the empowerment of others appears throughout the teachings that Jesus offers in Mark. In fact, not only the content of Jesus' teaching, but also his parabolic mode stimulates the hearers into active reflection. The parables do not deliver neatly contained propositions, but rather empower the hearers to engage in active, creative thought.

Along with what Jesus says and how he says it, Mark's Jesus puts into action this renovating power throughout his life and ministry. As Joanna Dewey and David Rhoads note about their discoveries

1. The translations throughout this article are based on the one I perform. This translation is based on the one offered in David Rhoads, Donald Michie, and Joanna Dewey's *Mark as Story* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), but includes modifications I made in light of my own work.

in relation to this Gospel, "...when Mark says, 'he came...to serve and to give his life [as] a ransom for many,' we came to understand that the life he gave referred to 'his whole life' in service...."² Mark's portrayal of Jesus standing in the baptismal waters among sinners, his miracles of healing and exorcism, his feedings of those who hunger, his equipping of others to heal and exorcize, his challenging of religious and political leaders in their abuse of power, all contribute to the new definition of renovating power that Mark offers us. Jesus' ministry finally leads to his painful execution because he insists on practicing power in a way that threatens those who act as tyrants over others. As womanist interpreter Raquel Annette St. Clair notes in regard to the end of Jesus' and his followers' practice, "Pain is a consequence of discipleship. It is not a lifestyle, a life sentence, or a life goal. Pain only signals the level of opposition to ministry."³

Internalizing and performing this Gospel allow me to experience the tension between these two ways of enacting power. As I prepare the story, I enter deeply into the frustrations and fears of those who challenge Jesus. This is not difficult since I know their motivations intimately and have stimulants toward the kind of power they pursue all around me. But I also rehearse another way of exercising power as I take on the persona of Jesus as well as several minor characters and enter into this still more excellent way. On a practical level, the rhythms of these

different embodiments mean negotiating how both kinds of power are conceived and brought to life. When thinking about the *stance* of those offended by Jesus, *stance* means more than their point of view or mindset although it includes this. Stance means exploring questions like these: How do they stand physically in relation to others? How is domination embodied in very concrete ways? Other questions are brought to Jesus as well: How does he hold himself in the presence of others? How does he embody a real alternative that causes fear to rise in some and life to rise in others? Working through these dynamics in the story, I find myself drawing on my own life experiences of abusive and life-giving power; in turn, my practice of embodying them within the story flows into my own daily practices leading to a deeper, more reflective, and empowering stance in the minute-by-minute performance of daily life.

While on a family trip to visit my parents, I used the multitude of hours in the car to run through Mark's gospel. On one particular morning, I was rehearsing the story when flashing lights appeared in my rearview mirror. I ended up with a speeding citation in which the officer claimed I was traveling fifteen miles per hour over the speed limit. I remain convinced to this day—backed by my speedometer, my GPS's appraisal of my velocity, and my wife's testimony—that the officer falsely added fifteen miles to my speed. When I challenged him on this point, he told me that I certainly had the right to contest his claim in court. Later, Internet searches confirmed that many others had been caught in this speed trap. I was livid at such injustice that preys on out-of-town travelers' vulnerability to raise local revenues.

Once I settled down a bit, I decided to put this experience to some good use. I let this violation fuel my telling of the

2. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, "Reflections" in *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect*, eds. Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 266.

3. Raquel Annette St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 166.

injustice that Jesus and others in the Gospel suffered. The story certainly gained new energy in this manner of telling. Finally the story would not allow it to end there for me; Mark began finishing my sentences for me. The story confronted me with Jesus who became indignant at the injustices *others* suffered and who knew he was only one among many, many people attacked by the authorities. I wondered if he was able to face his pseudo-trial without defensiveness because he knew that the injustice he suffered was but one piece of the daily reign of terror others also knew. He would not play some trump card to get out of the harm others would continue to face. [Here is where I quietly note that I had not imitated Jesus in this regard. I brought up my special pastoral status in a rather ungracious way to the officer who leaned on my window. My anger at the injustice of the speed trap could have been greatly alleviated if I got off with a warning that others would not get. Even though I was ineffective in my attempt to change the officer's mind, the power I tried to wield against him was manipulative power.]

My daughter's later comment that she had never seen me as intense and passionate as I was when facing off with that officer still gives me pause. When I think of the multitude of injustices that I have witnessed resulting from the systematic and persistent violence against those who are poor, who are not white or male, or whose sexual identity is not heterosexual, how sad that the most passionate my daughter has ever seen me was when I was defending my own rights in the face of a momentary lapse of my privilege. Mark's story served as a mirror that helped me to see how narrowly my own passion was focused and to begin to imagine a broader, more godly focus for my energies.

This particular process gave me insight into how the Gospel may have functioned

in its original context. Jesus may have *gotten my attention* in this incident through Mark's story, but that did not mean he *changed my heart and mind instantaneously*. For several days, I found myself locked in an on-going struggle between my gut response to what had happened and the more compassionate way that Jesus was calling me to follow. Some moments were better than others, some much worse. I can see that the story had a real impact on deeply entrenched moods and modes of being, reframing them even though they were not easily shifted.

In light of this experience, I have come to believe that the conflicts that Jesus confronts in Mark's gospel were told because they reflected the continued tensions within which Mark's hearers found themselves. Like me, they struggled between their long-learned mannerisms and the new way that Jesus offered. For example, they still occasionally wondered why Gentiles and sinners should be included in the community; so, Mark's Jesus showed up in the storytelling to clarify that commitment. They continued to wonder why their community was somewhat relaxed toward Sabbath requirements, or how God's Anointed One could have been crucified, or why the Temple was destroyed, or what it means that Jesus was raised. Since these issues endured, the risen Jesus took on flesh again in the telling of the story to address those on-going struggles. He made a real impact on these deeply entrenched issues even if full resolution was not instantaneous.

As the example above indicates, the story that has been taken to heart interrupts my life at points that I do not choose. The relationship with the story is indeed like that of an old friend who shares enough history with me to get my attention when I need it most. Through the discipline of learning the story by heart, I experience

a different kind of authority or power released by the text. It does not lord it over me, but steps into my life to serve my deepest needs in the context of God's reign. It authors or rewrites my life, sending me in a new direction. Those who have not undertaken the discipline of inhabiting the specific words written by another might imagine that this process is utterly restrictive. However, my experience is quite the opposite. I find that the story constructed by the evangelist is a place of spaciousness and freedom. In this way, through the very act of learning and telling the story again, I experience the renovating power that Jesus conceived. For me as a storyteller, the proclamation of this story becomes an incarnational moment through which Jesus comes again recreating life, opening up freedom, and re-conceiving power.

Many who have heard the story told by me have confessed to having a similar incarnational experience. One representative audience member stated, "When I heard Jesus say..." She spoke as though she had heard Jesus himself through the storied event. Many hearers have witnessed to this kind of sacramental experience of Mark's Jesus; they did not only find themselves thinking about the kingdom of God that came with Jesus, they also experienced it coming among them through the storytelling event. The healing story of the bleeding woman brought them a sense of their own wholeness; the rising of the paralytic gave them the power to get up when they could not move themselves; the challenge Jesus offered struck them; Jesus' cry upon the cross merged with the lament welling up within them; and the possibility that Jesus awaited them in "Galilee" became their own hope.

Through the reflections of my audience members, I have come to see that even the death of Jesus itself may serve as an empowering story. It is not so because

it speaks of some transaction between God and Jesus, but because it generates an encounter between Mark's Jesus and the hearer. Jesus' suffering helps many give voice to their own suffering and allows them to take it seriously. In ways that are not illogical but which also are not logic bound, they have heard their own sorrowful story in the narrative of violence against Jesus. Those final chapters of Mark's gospel are a vessel that has carried multiple forms of grief. I suspect that it functioned this way in relation to the devastation brought on by the Roman-Judean War of 66-70 C.E., including the destruction of the Temple. I also have heard contemporary people find their own abuse, abandonment, violation, political persecution, and brokenness become clear in relation to what they see Jesus suffer. In this connecting event, they receive again the solidarity and comfort that Jesus offered during his earthly life.

Similarly, the strange last verses of the story embody the values Jesus expressed during his life. When the young man clad in white makes his announcement, we are left with a word of promise that we cannot own but that can put us onto our own journey to meet Jesus again in Galilee. Mark's gospel denies us the religious fundamentalist's certitude. Mark appears to understand that such certitude often authorizes those who possess it to act violently against those who lack it. Mark promises that when Jesus comes among us, we will not be elevated over others. Rather when we enact empowering service with those in Galilee—those on the margins, those broken, hungry, ignored, abused or shamed—we will meet the risen Christ. The event created when the story is told reenacts in concrete ways the ministry of Jesus among us.

If many of my audience members have known this dynamic through my sharing in performances, I have experienced it

thirty, sixty, even one hundred-fold when learning the story with a community. Every couple of years I teach a class in which fifteen students learn to tell together the entire Gospel of Mark. Many of them come to the story with little theological background and even less experience in formal performance. Each class takes on a character of its own, but every time, the class community comes to embody learning in a way that takes on the renovating kind of power that Mark's Jesus conceived. The participants gain greater confidence from each other, risk vulnerability before each other, and become a community of support to each other. The environment created in these classrooms is qualitatively different than in other courses I teach. Even though I know more about the content of this topic than in my other courses, I find myself able to guard silence and to trust that the students will actively move into discoveries that the whole group needs in order to understand it. While the new perspectives may be different from what I have come to see in Mark's gospel, that difference feels generative rather than threatening. In these sessions, we enjoy more laughter and more tears, more personal growth, more honest sharing, more open struggling, and more solidarity among ourselves than in any other course I teach. The profound embodiment of the story proves to be transformative for us.⁴

It is one thing to experience this dynamic among a group of open and

inquisitive college students. I also have experienced how the storied event has changed my experience with professional colleagues. Every year I participate in a seminar that facilitates collaboration among trained storytellers who have scholarly commitment and scholars willing to venture into the practice of storytelling. The scope of this seminar of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (www.nbsint.org) moves beyond interest in the Gospel of Mark, although many of our members are leading interpreters of that Gospel. Our work together around the biblical story has created a rigorous academic community that is unlike any other I personally have known. Our work together is academically intense. Yet in addition to the academic exploration, we have become a community of mutual support. This is not to say that we agree on all points, but rather that in the midst of intense disagreement we have found our lives bound together in renovating ways. Although we are together for less than a week each year, I have discovered that the participants are primary members of my support community who allow me to know in the flesh the alternative kind of power that Jesus brings. Many others in the group have echoed this confession.

As we all know, when we tell others about a definitive relationship we have with another, words often fall short of the wonder we know. So too with this brief testimony to my friendship with the Gospel of Mark. I hope that my witness invites you to engage my friend for yourself. I trust that in taking Mark's story of Jesus to heart and binding your life to others who also experience this embodied event, you, too, will know the experience of the risen Christ in a new way. You, too, will find your understanding of power has been renovated; you, too, will directly experience Jesus' renovating power in your own life.

4. I have published other articles on this experience of teaching Mark in a college course. See my "Performance Criticism as Critical Pedagogy" in *Currents in Theology & Mission* 37 no. 4 (August 2010), 288–295. And "The Word Heard: How Hearing a Text Differs from Reading One" in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, ed. Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2009), 101–113.