

# Sixty Miles and Sixteen Chapters: My Journey to Learn the Gospel of Mark by Heart and What it Taught Me

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On the road again  
Just can't wait to get on the road again  
The life I love is making music with  
my friends  
And I can't wait to get on the road  
again.

—Willie Nelson,  
“On the Road Again”

My journey to learning the Gospel of Mark by heart began on the road. Sixty miles of blacktop, to be precise, running along Interstate 44 from Sullivan, Mo., to Kirkwood, Mo. In the summer of 2009, I left my first call at Peace Lutheran Church, Sullivan, and received a call to Trinity Lutheran Church, Kirkwood. Even though the economy had begun to collapse by then, my realtor assured me that I could still sell my house in Sullivan (a house purchased right before the housing bubble burst in 2006). So I began my new call at Trinity doing what I always do—learning the lectionary gospel readings by heart and performing them from memory. I picked up this little habit from Professor David Rhoads while a student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). My new congregation loved my presentations, and that helped ease the tension of serving a new call but still living sixty miles away in the town of my former call.

I had no idea then that on Palm Sunday 2011 I would perform the entire Gospel of Mark in front of an audience. I had no idea then that of this writing, August 2011, I would still be living in Sullivan, Mo. Good thing I am not a weatherman!

Memorize an entire Gospel? That was only something people like Dr. Rhoads did. Or those three to five people (depending on your search engine) you can find online who will come to your church for a nominal fee and perform the Gospel of Mark. I had been given a gift of memory, but the Sunday lectionary lessons were the best I could do. I even did the Sermon on the Mount once, and realized that was my limit. Sixteen entire chapters would drive me crazy.

Or so I thought. Then the fall of 2009 dragged on as I drove 120 miles round trip each day I came into the office. No news on the house. The new year, 2010, began and I still drove 120 miles round trip each day I came into the office. No news on the house. For the first nine months of my commuting odyssey I passed the time in my car by listening to various radio stations for music, weather, sports, politics, and other programs. By summertime I realized that my brain was turning to mush. My IQ was dropping. As the housing market in Missouri showed no signs of improving,

I knew I had to do something different. I had to find a way to utilize my commuting time. When the fall of 2010 blew in something had to be different.

Then the idea came to me. Why not memorize Mark? With two hours in a car to rehearse, perhaps I could pull this off. What was there to lose? The “Bob and Tom Show” would still be there waiting for me if I failed. I told my wife, Jana, and a couple of close friends at the church of my plans. I also told my administrative assistant. She looked at me as if I were speaking Greek.

And so in September of 2010 I began. My goal was to have Mark memorized by Palm Sunday. Then I planned to perform it as a fundraiser for Lutheran Campus Ministry in St. Louis. My process was to take a chapter of Mark and try to memorize it on Monday. This was usually a whole-day affair. Then, when I drove back and forth from Kirkwood for the week, I would rehearse the chapter I had memorized. For me this was the hardest part—I had a knack for memorizing Scripture quickly, but I needed to practice it multiple times for it to stick. My commute enabled such practice. After a chapter was “up there,” as I like to say, I would begin the next chapter. Of course, as I rehearsed the new chapter, the old chapters had to be continually rehearsed as well. And so the building blocks began.

By the first of October I had six chapters down. Then my spouse Jana gave birth to our second son, Grant Paul Sturm, on the afternoon of October 12 (I know—we just missed 10/10/10). Suffice it to say, waking up each night to a crying baby, midnight diaper changes, and a befuddled three-year-old who reacted to his brother’s birth by moving into his parents’ room did not help the memory process. By December I was still stuck on chapter 7. I began to have some doubts as

to whether I could actually pull this off. Had I bitten off more than I could chew?

Thankfully, two events happened in the month of January. First of all, I joined the YMCA. Nothing like boring time on the treadmill to help one memorize Scripture. The kinetic energy worked as I plowed through chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 while working out. Second, by a divine miracle my son Grant began to sleep through the night—8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. My wife and I decided not to ask any questions but to take the blessing for what it was worth. Back on regular sleep, our moods and our ability to work increased dramatically. February brought with it chapters 11, 12, and 13. By the end of March I had finished the Gospel. April was spent rehearsing the whole Gospel. Either behind the wheel or in my garage I would recite chapters 1–8, take a break, and then recite chapters 9–16. The big date, April 17, 2011, Palm Sunday, was approaching. I knew that sooner or later I would have to perform the whole thing at once.

The first time I recited the entire Gospel at once was the day before Palm Sunday. I had planned to take a nice walk on Grant’s Trail in St. Louis and recite the Gospel to myself. The weather did not cooperate, however, and St. Louis was blanketed with low temperatures and freezing rain. So I did the next best thing. I went to the closest mall I could find (how long has it been since I’ve been in a shopping mall?) and walked with the senior citizens as I recited the Gospel to myself. Walking and mumbling to myself, the others probably thought I had some mental problems. My lasting memory from that day was not the moment I finished the Gospel. Instead, my lasting memory was the Pokémon card-playing conference that was going on in the mall’s food court. I mention this because since my experience at the mall I have performed the Gospel

of Mark four times in front of an invited audience in three different states. If one tallied all the people who have heard me, the number would not even come close to half of the children and adults at that Pokémon conference. Truly, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...

Finally, Palm Sunday arrived. About fifty people gathered at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Manchester, Mo. I made it through chapters 1–8 without a problem. My only mental hiccup was the gentlemen who sat in the front row and followed my performance in his Bible. He never looked up from Scripture. This messed with my head a bit. Am I getting it right? Finally, I had to stop looking at him and focus on the rest of the audience. During the intermission, I said to him, “I don’t mind if you follow me. However, you’ll probably get more out of the performance if you just listen.” He replied, “Well, I just wanted to make sure you had indeed memorized it. And you did well. I’ll listen now.” After the intermission I continued with chapters 9–16. Most people listened. Some people fell asleep. Some people cried. By the end, when I departed from the sanctuary repeating the opening lines of the Gospel, the audience rose and gave me a standing ovation. A feeling of relief and appreciation fell upon my heart. Eight months after working on that first line, I had accomplished my goal. Thanks be to God. And thanks be to a depressed housing market. If I had not had my two hours of rehearsal time in my car every day, memorizing Mark in my heart and mind would have never happened. I do not wish a commute and a frustrating inability to sell a house on anyone, but truly, those were the main ingredients in my blueprint for learning Mark by heart.

Now that I have shared a bit of my journey, I want to spend the second half of this article discussing what I learned

from my journey. You may have noticed by now that I have used interchangeably the terms “memorize” and “learn by heart” when discussing Mark. To me the reason performers of Mark use the phrase “learn by heart” is because one cannot memorize Mark and not be changed by it. It is not just information that stays in your head. Mark’s words enter your heart, and they teach you things about yourself, the world, and the church. I learned too much from Mark to write it all down in this article. Therefore, I will share with you the three main lessons I learned. I will divide my learning into three parts—what I learned about the Gospel, what I learned about my audience, and what I believe the Gospel of Mark has to say to the church today.

First, having gone through the process of memorizing Mark I can now say that I whole-heartedly believe what David Rhoads and others have been saying for years—the Gospel was written in order to be performed. The Gospel was written to be read aloud. It was not written as a book, but more like a script. As a seminarian, I never noticed any chiasmic structure in Mark when I was reading it. By performing it, however, I have noticed a grand chiasm. A chiasm is a rhetorical device, based on reverse parallelism, which draws the listener into the middle of the writing. A chiasm not only facilitates performing a piece; it also facilitates listening to it. As James L. Bailey writes, “Chiasms have great rhetorical appeal and are used primarily for aural effect and for purposes of memory.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, I believe the author wrote the Gospel of Mark in order for it to be performed aloud.

Here is the ring construction that I found in the Gospel. Whether the author truly intended to structure the Gospel in

1. James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 53.

this way I do not know. All I know is I found it and it helped me to memorize the Gospel.

**A Good News!** (the beginning of the “good news” of Jesus Christ—1:1)

**B Holy Tear** (the heavens are “torn” as Jesus is baptized—1:10)

**C Calling** (the first disciples are called by Jesus—1:16–20)

**D Supper with Sinners** (Jesus has dinner with tax collectors and sinners—2:15–17)

**E Plotting Against Jesus** (Pharisees and Herodians plot against him—3:6)

**F Hospitality Misunderstood** (Jesus declares who his true family is—3:31–35)

**G “Unknown” Growth to Come** (Parable of Wheat growing secretly—4:26–29)

**H Run from the Hills** (Swine run from the hill into the sea and are drowned—5:11–13)

**I Resurrection** (little girl is returned to life—5:42)

**J Entrance into Rejection** (Jesus rejected by hometown; John the Baptist killed—6:1–6, 17–29)

**K Jesus Tested and Jesus Heals** (Jesus tested by Pharisees, then heals the sick—7:5, 29–35)

**L Dumb Disciples and Angry Jesus** (Disciples misunderstand and let Jesus down—8:14–21)

**M Jesus is Messiah Who Suffers and Dies and is Raised from the Dead—8:27–33**

**L1 Dumb Disciples and Angry Jesus** (Disciples cannot cast out demon—9:17–19)

**K1 Jesus Tested and Jesus Heals** (Pharisees test again, followed by healing—10:2, 31–52)

**J1 Entrance into Rejection** (Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday—11:1–11, 18)

**I1 Resurrection** (Jesus explains resurrection of the dead to Sadducees—12:24–27)

**H1 Run to the Hills** (Jesus commands those in Judea to flee to the mountains—13:14)

**G1 “Unknown” Suffering to Come** (No one knows when final suffering will come—13:32–37)

**F1 Hospitality Misunderstood** (Jesus defends woman with alabaster jar—14:1–9)

**E1 Jesus Plotted Against** (Judas agrees to betray Jesus—14:10–11)

**D1 Supper with Sinners** (Jesus shares Last Supper with the one who is to betray him—14:17–25)

**C1 Jesus Calls Disciples** (Jesus calls his disciples into Gethsemane and urges wakefulness—14:33–42)

**B1 Holy Tear** (as Jesus is crucified, the curtain of the temple tears—15:38)

**A1 Good News!** (the tomb is empty; Jesus goes ahead of us—16:5–7)

From this chiasmic construction, the teller of Mark can clearly see the main theological point Mark is making. It is found right in the middle—chapter 8:29–31: “Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ . . . Then Jesus began to tell them that the Messiah must suffer many things and be rejected by the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes, and be killed, and three days after being killed rise again.” By his structure of composition, Mark declares that this is the main point of the story. First, Mark wants to impress upon his audience that Jesus is the Messiah. No question about it. Second, Mark wants to impress upon his readers *what it means* that Jesus is the Messiah. It means that he is the one who will suffer, die, and rise again. Mark unfolds this theological claim in the narrative of the second half of his gospel (chapters 9–16).

Second, I want to share what I learned most about my audience. As I mentioned earlier, I have performed Mark in its entirety on four occasions. First was my Palm Sunday performance. Then I performed Mark at a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregation as a fundraiser for a missionary. Then I performed Mark at my former internship congregation while in town for a youth mission trip. Finally, I performed Mark, with a bout of walking pneumonia, at a colleague’s congregation as a fundraiser for a food pantry. Each performance was broken up into two acts with an intermission in between. Each performance lasted roughly two and a half hours. Generally speaking, each audience was very similar in its number and age range. Each performance garnered a crowd of twenty-five to fifty people. I would say that in each audience at least 70 percent of those in attendance were of retirement age. From all of my performances I counted five people, total, under the age of twenty. One of them looked at his Smartphone the whole time and then left during intermission.

What I am trying to say is that my audiences at performances of Scripture by heart mirror the demographics of the mainline church as a whole—mostly retired people, some adults, and virtually no youth. In addition, I had an eerily similar experience at my first two performances—one at a larger ELCA church and one at a large LCMS church. When I walked into the sanctuary on Palm Sunday, one hour before my performance was scheduled to begin, I met an adult who was removing microphones from the sanctuary. “Sorry,” she said, “We have youth praise band practice later and we need to move these.” *Band practice is more meaningful than someone performing Mark?* During my next performance, at a large LCMS church in St. Louis, the youth praise band actually rehearsed in the second sanctuary during my performance.

In both cases, my performance had been widely advertised. In both cases, the youth directors of each congregation knew about my performance. In both cases, no youth from the congregations came to listen to me. In both cases, many youth from both congregations participated in praise band practice.

I do not share this memory because I want the reader to feel sorry for me. The lack of youth did not disappoint me too much—I had too much on my mind (sixteen chapters) to be sorely disappointed. Instead, I bring up this issue because it taught me a painful lesson. Young people today (ages twenty-one and younger) are not going to be wooed into the church to watch something. No matter how “cool” or different it may be, the numbers will not be that large. Instead, young people are wooed into the church in order to *participate* in something. They want to share their gifts. They want to be in on the ministry. I grossly underestimated this desire. In the future, if I perform Mark I will be sure to include youth in some contributing way—such as a performance during intermission or performing small sections of the Gospel themselves.

Finally, I want to share what I believe the Gospel of Mark has to say to the ELCA today. In the eight months that I spent memorizing Mark, one passage in particular caught my attention the most. At the end of Mark 2, Jesus chides the Pharisees because they cried out over his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath. Then Jesus says these words, “The Sabbath was made for humankind; not humankind for the Sabbath” (2:22). While I was in seminary, I glazed over those words and did not contemplate them much. Now, after I have been a parish pastor for five years, those words have taken on a new importance for me. With those words, I believe Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, “Don’t try to conform people to religion, but instead

conform religion to people.” This is exactly what Jesus does throughout the Gospel of Mark. Whether healing on the Sabbath, touching an unclean person, or conversing with a Gentile, Jesus constantly takes the true blessings of religion and conforms them to his audience. He does not make people fit the current idea of religious devotion in order to engage them. He takes himself out of “proper” religious devotion and engages others on their own ground. In other words, he takes religion to them.

If one boiled down the entire Gospel, I believe this is the most important teaching for the church today. I think we are wasting a lot of energy trying to force the outside world to conform to us. What can we do to bring others in? What can we do to bring young people in? How can we force (manipulate?) them into taking up the roles in the church that we have taken up since 1950? So much energy is wasted, in my estimation, trying to pigeon-hole people into structures in our church that once flourished but which have now become ineffective. I see a denomination that, although being creative, is still desperately trying to conform people to its structure. I see a denomination believing that humankind was meant to fit into the Sabbath.

What would the reversal look like? What if the ELCA practiced the belief that the Sabbath was meant for people? What if we tried to conform to the outsider? I think the church would be a different place. For example, many people note that young adults these days, often called millennials, are just not as committed to the organized church as the previous generation was. People in their twenties and thirties will join your congregation. And they will participate. But they are not going to be in attendance every week. And they do not have much extra time to serve on committees. And due to rising educational costs that previous generations

never even imagined, they are not going to tithe. It seems these realities have caused consternation among church leaders. We

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have tried to reverse the trend. Mark 2 encourages me to ask the question: What is so bad about these realities?

So the next generation is not going to worship every week. So they are not going to serve on more than one committee. So they are not even close to tithing. What’s so bad about this? Why is this a problem?

To me, the true problem, the true elephant in the room, is full-time compensation for clergy. I believe this is the unnamed fear among pastors. We are frustrated that the new generation is not as active and is not able to pledge like the former one. Why? Because that means that we may not be able to continue to be compensated like we have been previously. If attendance and pledges are down, giving is down. If giving is down, the ability for a

local congregation to pay a pastor full-time plus benefits becomes elusive. To me this is the problem. We are concerned about our paychecks. And so we bemoan the lack of participation of millennials.

Mark reminds us that the Sabbath was made for humankind. What if we were to change the way the church functions? What if we were to change clergy compensation? What if the church were not the sole means of income for the pastor? What if the pastor were not expected to be in the office during the week, and was free to seek other employment? Other denominations, mostly of Baptist affiliation, have successfully functioned under this model for years. In the town of my first call the two Baptist congregations had four times the number of worshippers than my small congregation did. Both of their ministers had outside employment and were not expected to be in the office full-time. Yet, my small congregation was expected to pay me roughly a school administrator's compensation. And we wonder why clergy are leaving the small congregations? And we wonder why small congregations are struggling to keep open their doors?

The irony is, in my opinion, that most millennials, even Lutheran ones, do not need a full-time pastor. I wholeheartedly believe if I went to all my current members in their thirties and said, "Look, I'll be there on Sunday, I'll be there on Wednesday, I'll be there in an emergency. But other than that I'll be at my other job," they would say, "Fine with us." If a new generation is telling us, by their lack of participation, that they do not expect the pastor to be full-time why are we insisting that the pastor be compensated full-time? We can point the finger in a lot of places to understand the struggle of the mainline churches today. I think we should point at ourselves and our

existing structure. I do not claim to have the answer, but if I take Mark seriously, and I do, then I think there are ways we can make the church exist for humankind. Shorten the length of seminary. Cut the costs. Instead of requiring Hebrew, require a class on employment outside the church. Encourage supplemental education among seminarians such as counseling, social work, or educational degrees. Thinking such as this is what I believe Mark is telling us to do today.

In closing, let me add that I once saw Willie Nelson perform in St. Louis. Sort of a rite-of-passage for every native Texan. At the end of the show, Willie announced there would not be an encore, saying, "Too often in the past we've come back, and no one was here anymore. So, this is our last song." He played one more song, and sure enough walked off. The crowd cheered for a while, thinking he was not serious, but then it became apparent that he was. The concert was over. Willie does not do encores.

In the same way, Mark closes without an encore. We never see the resurrected Jesus. We hear of him, but he does not show up back on stage. The women are only instructed to go and share the good news. Then, the "young man" promises, Jesus "will go ahead of you" (16:5-7). As a church if we expect the resurrected Jesus just to show up and give us all the answers, if we expect an encore, we are going to be disappointed. Instead, I believe we are called to share the good news, to embody the good news, to be bold and risky in the way we talk about the church, and to be fearless enough to leave no sacred cows as we discuss our way of functioning. On such a risky road, Christ promises to meet us. Not at the end of the journey, but during it. He is already on the road again, ahead of us, and waiting.