

The Cult of Innocence

Scripture Texts (Common English Bible)

James 5:13-20

13 If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing. 14 If any of you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve. 17 Elijah was a person just like us. When he earnestly prayed that it wouldn't rain, no rain fell for three and a half years. 18 He prayed again, God sent rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

19 My brothers and sisters, if any of you wander from the truth and someone turns back the wanderer, 20 recognize that whoever brings a sinner back from the wrong path will save them from death and will bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

Mark 9:38-50

Recognize your allies

38 John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone throwing demons out in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us."

39 Jesus replied, "Don't stop him. No one who does powerful acts in my name can quickly turn around and curse me. 40 Whoever isn't against us is for us. 41 I assure you that whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will certainly be rewarded.

42 "As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and to be thrown into the lake. 43 If your hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off. It's better for you to enter into life crippled than to go away with two hands into the fire of hell, which can't be put out.[a] 45 If your foot causes you to fall into sin, chop it off. It's better for you to enter life lame than to be thrown into hell with two feet.[b] 47 If your eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out. It's better for you to enter God's kingdom with one eye than to be thrown into hell with two. 48 That's a place where worms

don't die and the fire never goes out.[c] 49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? Maintain salt among yourselves and keep peace with each other.”

Transcript

Introduction

“There’s a lot of weirdness in this text.” That was the opening line of a podcast episode from Yale Divinity where they look at a passage from the lectionary briefly each week, including this week’s Mark text. Yeah, I think that’s a pretty good assessment. Most of it is very familiar if you’ve been around the church for long. But that doesn’t make it that much less weird. There are a lot that feel like non-sequiturs, jumping between loosely related ideas, and I suspect most sermons using it end up picking a specific part to zone in on rather than trying to treat it as one whole.

When I first read it in preparation for today, the first section is what I zoned in on. I started with the punchline “whoever is not against us is with us.”

There was also a Numbers text in the lectionary for today, chapter 11:4-29, that I did not include which had a parallel story. As the disciples do with Jesus in Mark, Moses’ assistant Joshua comes to Moses and tells Moses to stop a couple people from prophesying. Like Jesus in the Mark story, Moses doesn’t see it as a problem at all, instead glad that others are also doing good work, and warns Joshua not to be jealous for his sake.

There’s a good lesson there about celebrating those who are acting in line with our values, even if they aren’t active in our church or any church.

That was it. That was the whole original sermon idea.

But unfortunately for those of you think sermons are too long, I kept thinking about these texts. And I kept thinking about the general state of Christianity in North America. And I kept coming across books and podcasts that seemed to have relevant things to say. In fact, I kept thinking about them enough that, in combination with some needed juggling of the worship schedule, this changed from one sermon into two. I will also be speaking again next week, continuing where I leave off today but from a slightly different direction.

I’ll also use this as an opportunity to say that my notes will be available on the Rockway website in a few days, after I share them with Stephanie and she has a chance to post them. Those notes include roughly what I intended to say, as well as some bits that got cut out and references to some of those books and podcasts. The sermon will also be available

publicly on the YouTube. Every time I preach there are a couple of people who ask me for my notes, so I'm going to say that upfront now.

Power and Christian Institution

First, I looked at more context of the Mark passage to try to connect some of those seemingly disconnected pieces. Sometimes its easy when we mostly encounter the Bible in these little segments to forget that these stories were pieced together the way they were for a reason. The Bible didn't originally have the section headers we have now; those are put in by modern translators and don't even always agree with each other. It didn't even have chapter and verse numbers for a long time, or for that matter, even punctuation in the original Greek. Mark was just one long book.

I found that the section before the lectionary text is helpful for some framing. There, Jesus says that he will be killed and then rise again. The disciples don't get it. So of course, they don't ask any follow-up questions, which is a great way to continue to not get it. Then the disciples were debating with each other about who is the greatest. Jesus tells them that whoever wants to be first must be least of all, then calls in a nearby child to emphasize the point: whoever welcomes one of these children in his name welcomes him. That is some of our thematic context: the disciples are trying to position themselves to be near the top of the Jesus follower hierarchy. Jesus tries to teach them to reverse their thinking to prioritize the marginalized, particularly in this case, children.

With that in mind, I think a lot of that conflict is carrying forward into today's text. We see that the disciples were not upset with what this other person was doing, the casting out demons part. They weren't even upset with his attitude doing it. They say that he was doing it in Jesus' name. That phrase is easy for us to read as if the name Jesus or Christ or Christian is a magic word. That is often how it gets used today. Sometimes if we're being honest, when we end a prayer with "in Jesus' name", we're probably thinking of it like a magic word, thinking that makes it more likely that we'll get what we want. But also more to the point here, it is often used as a magic word by others like politicians and online social influencers. In that context, it is used to manufacture consent by meaning things like "we're the good guys, you should vote for us, and you definitely shouldn't be upset about all the terrible things we are doing because we are CHRISTIANS and that is all that matters!" I'm going to be talking about them more directly next week.

But in that cultural context, the phrasing "in the name of" means more like "a representative of." If you do something in the name of the king, you're saying that you're doing what the king wanted you to do. A modern twist on that might be "don't shoot the messenger." If the messenger is relaying what somebody with higher authority told them to do, and you don't like the message, the person you're really upset with is the higher

authority, not the messenger. So when the disciples are saying that this exorcist is doing it in Jesus' name, they probably mean that he was doing it in a way consistent with Jesus.

The disciples acknowledged that this exorcist was doing a good thing for the right reasons, but were upset "because he wasn't following us." He's outside of their perceived in-group, outside their desired power structure. And like the previous passage, Jesus again conveys that they've missed the point and need to flip their concept of power.

We're talking about two groups. There are people in the Jesus institution – for lack of a better word - doing good work, and people who are inspired by Jesus but not part of the institution also doing good work. Obviously, there are a lot of other groups in the world, some of which I'll talk about more in part two next week.

In the modern world, that latter group is often those who decided they couldn't put up with all the problems of the church but are still compelled by Jesus in some way. This is a substantial group, mainly because the church has messed up a lot. There's a lot of reasons why people might have problems with Christianity. Even within the themes of hierarchy and power, there is a lot to work with, past and present. Crusades and witch hunts and inquisitions and colonialism and residential school and many aspects of the current wave of Christian nationalism, and on and on.

This quest for power, in both the disciples and the modern church, is usually backed up by what Brian McLaren calls a cult of innocence, in his book *Do I Stay Christian*. To justify that your group should rule over others, you need to believe that your group is the correct pure group, and those others are evil that must be punished, or at least inferior that must be controlled.

And it is really easy for me to hear that and think "yeah, I'm so glad I don't have that attitude like some other people. I'm so glad that I am one of the good guys. I'm never judgemental like those bad guys! We have to find a way to stop *them!*" And then I realize that I just did my own cult of innocence thinking. It's a human temptation, not unique to some other group of people we don't like. It's one that we aren't immune to, and the more we think we're immune to it the more likely we are to fall into it.

Cutting It Off

That brings us back to the second part of the Mark text. In my experience, a lot of the time I have heard this passage quoted started at verse 43: if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, and so on. I think I heard that a lot as a teenager and young adult being on the fringes of the purity culture movement. I wasn't getting nearly the worst of it as my church was pretty good, but I got some tangentially especially as the Internet became a thing. It was used to sell things like monitoring software on your computer to make sure you weren't accessing

pornography. The text was interpreted that you should cut off the ways that you individually sin – and of course the only real sins worth talking about are the sexual ones. And I don't want to completely squash the general idea there. There is some wisdom in identifying your weak points and having the self-control to avoid them. But also, the extreme focus on sex was bad, and even the better more general version is maybe missing some context here.

The context for Mark here is somebody who has harmed a child, or in an interesting bit of phrasing, has caused a child to sin. In that case, the thing that we're talking about needing to be cut off might be more about harmful power structures and the attitudes that support them within our community, not about individual computer access. They need to be cut off before they become engrained in children, causing them to then continue the cycles of violence.

For me, this is where the cult of innocence attitude jumps in again. See, this text tells me to cut off those terrible Christian nationalists! They are obviously harming the marginalized and amplifying these cycles of violence. I should spend all my free time on the Internet making sure to tell strangers about how those aren't real Christians, not like I am!

And then I check myself again. For one, arguing with strangers on the Internet is mostly counterproductive. But I think more importantly, it leads into that much bigger problem of strengthening the cult of innocence.

Today we are observing Truth and Reconciliation Day, including in the second hour. I've heard this cult of innocence come up in conversations around that, too. It usually goes something like "those who committed the atrocities of the residential schools thought they were doing a good thing." And it's probably true that a lot of them did, because they subscribed to this cult of innocence where obviously they were superior and had to enforce their ways on others who are inferior. But when we say that as an excuse, a way to look away from the atrocities, we are refusing to acknowledge the harms done. We are setting up ourselves to do similar harms out of our own cult of innocence. We haven't addressed the root of the problem being our sense of superiority.

That's the kind of scenario where this language about needing to cut off a part of the church body might come into play. It is cutting off the part of the church that might allow abuse. It is cutting off the pursuit of power over and against others. It is cutting off the superiority of my group over their group.

The Mark text feels like a strict binary. That's not unusual for rabbis in that time to talk in hyperbole.

In practice, all of this can get messier. It isn't always clear what constitutes abuses of power and what is a difference of opinion about some complicated moral question.

And there is some bad history, for Mennonites and elsewhere, of rushing to apply “the ban” or “church discipline” to way too many things, banning anybody who doesn’t fit the high standards of the community. This then creates the power structure in the other direction, with the church now the abuser of the person they’ve kicked out.

To speak in very broad generalities, a lot of conservative churches today would err on that side, quick to cast out somebody who doesn’t follow all the rules sufficiently. A lot of liberal churches have the opposite problem, where they are afraid of standing up for anything in case they go too far and alienate somebody already in the community. In doing so end up supporting an abusive status quo. I think that’s the idea at the end of the reading, about the salt losing its saltiness. If there isn’t some unique substance to a community that makes it safe for the oppressed, they might end up through passivity with the same result as the overly aggressive power-seeking community.

James’ Vision of Community

There was another text read today. Ultimately, I included this James reading instead of the Numbers text because I think it provides some needed balance. The emphasis in this one is on restoration, bringing somebody back into community, rather than cutting somebody or something off. Two things about this community are named:

1. They confess their sins together.
2. They pray together and sing together.

I think those two components are a valuable part of this bigger discussion of how do we retain our saltiness against this domination mentality, without falling into that mentality ourselves.

Confessing our sins together helps combat the cult of innocence. That quest for power, that desire to rule over others, needs that fuel of feeling superior. And when we have a culture instead of being able to admit when we’ve messed up, or the things we’re struggling with, and we’re working together to do better, it’s a lot harder for that cult of innocence to take hold. It’s hard to want to dominate others while having a true sense of your own weaknesses. Not in a shameful way, just an honest one.

Several years ago, we were doing a series on the Mennonite Confession of Faith.

Apparently, I’m a glutton for punishment taking hard topics that nobody else wants to talk about. This week and next week are things like discipline and nationalism and Christian identity. That time I looked at the Confession of Faith and promptly signed up for the article on sin. After talking about confession and repentance in some more detail than I did today, Scott got up for the congregational prayer and jokingly asked if anybody wanted to make a big public confession. To be clear, that’s not what I’m talking about, except maybe if it is a

case where you harmed the whole community then you might need to apologize to the whole community. But for the most part, I'm talking more about the kinds of things that were highlighted in the service a couple weeks ago around a horizontal caring community. Ideally there would be someone or a small group that you feel safe talking to about the things you're struggling with, or the way you harmed somebody and are trying to make it better. And a big part of the work of a local church is fostering an environment where those kinds of relationships can form and include everybody.

The other idea from the James text is praying together and singing together. These are both ways to build a sense of community and shared values, to align our priorities with each other, with wider Christian tradition, and with God. They help us define ourselves as ourselves in a positive way. We're not primarily defined by being better than them. Instead: What are we for? What is the kind of community that we want to be? When you have a clear vision of what you are, not only who or what you are against, your attention is focused there in the centre instead of on the boundaries trying to police who is and who isn't good enough.

A few years ago, we had an exercise explicitly like this. We developed as a church a vision statement that in part says, "we continue to grow and learn as we seek to live Christ's wisdom and peace in the world." Over time I've grown to like that statement more and more. We have a clearly defined positive centre, Christ's wisdom and peace, and we acknowledge that we won't always get it right but will keep growing together.

Conclusion

We've been in an interesting time as a congregation for a few years, basically since soon after that statement. Covid stopped us from meeting in person for a year and a half. Some who used to be regulars never came back. Some are joining us online, for any of a few very good reasons, not just Covid. Then our pastor of many years left, and we had some time with an interim pastor arrangement. Then Thomas fully took over, which in some ways is a brand-new thing and in other ways is completely familiar. A lot of these kinds of transitional times a community is just trying to tread water, to keep the pieces from falling apart. And thank you to everybody who has put in so much time keeping the pieces from falling apart.

But those transitional times also give an opportunity, a chance to zoom out a bit and ask how we want to define ourselves. Not just what we stand against, not some cult of innocence pride that at least we aren't like those people, but what do we stand for. That tension is where I will pick up more next week.

Resources

Books

Do I Stay Christian: A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned by Brian McLaren. This is a very pastoral book taking an honest look at the concept of a Christian identity. It acknowledges a lot of very serious harms both past and present that would justifiably cause us to abandon the label. It also includes practical reasons why you may choose to keep the label despite those things, and then offers some suggestions on how to proceed either way. The main idea borrowed for this sermon was the cult of innocence. It will be used more in part two next week.

How To Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace by Melissa Florer-Bixler, a Mennonite USA pastor. This is a great examination of how Jesus responded to very real enemies and taught us to do the same.

God and Empire by John Dominic Crossan. This is a good overview of the Bible's conflict between an imperial worldview and a bottom-up peace worldview. At risk of disagreeing with one of the greatest living New Testament scholars, I do think he puts Revelation in the wrong category, though, missing out on what many other scholars will point out are the nonviolent themes.

YouTube and Podcasts

Chapter, Verse, and Season from Yale Divinity School. This doesn't tie a lot into the themes of this week, but I did reference it at the beginning. They have almost completed their 3-year trip through the lectionary.

Homebrewed Christianity has had a lot of episodes relevant here but I'll highlight two for this half:

- [Do I Stay Christian? a conversation with Brian McLaren about his new book](#) This is the intro to a series with Brian about the book.
- [Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism, on Homebrewed Christianity](#). This conversation, related to a different book that I have not read, looks at how Christian nationalism has not always been a right-wing problem.

Deleted Scene - Concentric Circles

Building on the idea of a centred positive definition, not policing the boundaries, I've sometimes used a model from Greg Boyd and Woodland Hills Church in Minnesota that has concentric circles.

At the centre is the person of Jesus. That's what matters most. If we're still looking toward the person of Jesus, we're still in the same tradition. Then there's dogma, which is the kind of things that were defined as orthodox Christianity a long time ago in ecumenical councils and for the most part is still maintained. Then there's doctrine, where the differences do often have practical implications but there's a lot of room for disagreement. That might include things like whether you do infant or adult baptism. It matters, and it might even matter enough that you pick a church with that as a factor – it is hard if you are a strong believer in adult baptism and you're in a church doing infant baptism, or vice versa – but it's ultimately fine and maybe even good that there are both. Finally, there's opinion, which can be interesting to talk about but doesn't really matter in a lot of practical ways.

Tripp Fuller, on his podcast Homebrewed Christianity, has told a story about a youth confirmation class he taught. He inherited it as a big dogma and doctrine list to work through. But he reworked it to be a series of experiments in doing the things Jesus taught. He told the youth to write out their big theological questions throughout the course and put them in a big fishbowl, visible at the front of the room, and he promised he would get around to answering them eventually. But then he kept stalling answering them until the end after doing all these experiments. Then when they got to the end, they found nobody was still asking questions like whether Gandhi is in Hell, because they had already tried praying for their enemies. Through that experiment, they felt like they learned what they needed to know about God's position toward those who are different. They never needed to sit and study their denomination's doctrinal statements to have an intellectual debate. It was clear because they focused on what mattered most first.

There were similar themes in a recent Canadian Mennonite article: [Big tent, small centre | Canadian Mennonite Magazine](#)