

Jesus Gets Famous  
Mark 1.21-28  
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Epiphany 4B  
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I'm sure you've read a novel before that contains long passages of description, not really driving the plot, and you easily begin skimming through paragraphs about forest or the layout of a farm. Maybe it's not the best practice, but I'm certainly a skimmer of long stories. Mark's gospel is the opposite of that. If you skim and skip, hoping for more plot, then you've missed details that really are the plot. Every line, every image, every detail to note is part of the story Mark is weaving of who Jesus is and why Jesus matters.

The story begins with Jesus' baptism, going to John at the river Jordan. In this baptism story is a clarity of the movement. Paired with the immediate journey into wilderness, Jesus knows who he is and what his work will be about. Next are the stories of calling. He gathers disciples; he builds a team who will join him in the work of the movement. And today we hear as he preaches with authority—publicly *stating* what the movement is about, then immediately healing in the temple—publicly *displaying* what the movement is about. In Mark, Jesus authority is about presence and affirmed in action. Jesus' teaching is powerfully paired with action. There is no dogma to affirm but only a way to be lived out.

Now some of us don't really get into the miracle stories, in general, and the exorcism stories, in particular. They're weird. They're fantasy. They're hard to make sense of intellectually. But they matter. They really matter to Mark's story of who Jesus is and why Jesus matters, and we can't skim over them as details while we are looking for more plot. I think Lamar Williamson, Jr., can help the skeptical among us as he reminds us the question to ask of this text is "not, 'What really happened?' but 'What did this happening really mean?'"<sup>1</sup> What does it mean that Jesus gets clear about who he is and what his movement is about. Jesus builds a team to join him in the work. Jesus publicly states what he is about, then he immediately reaches out to the most ignored, most avoided, most tormented, most isolated person who has burst into sacred space and disrupted the order of things. This is not someone the good religious folks would have wanted to be near socially much less be near in their worship space. Worship has

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<sup>1</sup> Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark*, p. 20

order. Worship is dignified. Worship is for those of us with our stuff together. Right? Too much?

Jesus stands in that sacred space in the midst of all its order and dignity, preaching to all those good folks pretending to have their lives figured out; he establishes that his teaching has power and then immediately drives out a spirit. Immediately goes to someone whose life is being held between life and death, reaching for heaven but living in hell. What did this happening really mean? Consider this first healing, this first miracle, in Mark's gospel. People have heard him speak with power and now watch him go *toward* one they avoid. Jesus is showing everyone who just heard him preach—Where do you good religious people not want to go? Who is on the outside and considered too dangerous to be near? Who does the world despise as weak? That's where Jesus immediately wants to be. That's who Jesus immediately wants to be with. That's what Jesus' movement is about.

The people who are following Jesus haven't joined a really excellent Bible study to ooh and ah and applaud his powerful teaching. The people who are following Jesus have joined a radical movement of revolutionary love. And Jesus is now going to show them just how extraordinary that movement is. He invites them to come and follow him, but this won't be temple-based teaching. This won't be lessons to write out in a journal and roundly ignore in regular life. These disciples are going to study alongside him, wander with him, watch what he does up close (and maybe closer than they desire), and then he's going to ask them to do it all, too. They're going to teach what they've studied. He's going to take a few steps back as they lead the way. They're going to serve and heal and care as he watches them. And once he's gone, they're going to do it all by themselves. The power and authority that clearly pours from him is going to pour from them, too.

teaching + exorcism validate authority

Jesus gets famous pretty fast—he's doing the kinds of things that attract attention and foster hope. If you know the stories of the gospels, then you know it doesn't take long for crowds to flock to him, hoping to be healed. Hoping to hear a word of power. Parents bring their children to him. Friends sneak to him through a roof in a house for a healing touch, a woman grabs his clothes knowing she can access his power just by proximity, representatives come just asking for a healing word for a sick or dying one at home. He rapidly develops a reputation and a following, though the fame he has is more like notoriety. He is known everywhere for this power and authority. He's known everywhere for his teaching and healing. Some people are drawn to him and want to be on the receiving end of that seeing and knowing and healing and restoring. And

then, as we well know, others will see his power as weakness and his authority as threatening.

For us today wondering what did this happening in Mark's gospel really mean? I think the answer we're seeking is wrapped up in Jesus' fame. What does it mean to become a follower of Jesus? How is that played out? And what does it mean for us today who basically claim to be in Jesus' fan club?

I'm reading Gregory Boyle's newest book, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. In it he expands on the work of his first book, *Tattoos on the Heart*—the story of his gang-intervention work in Los Angeles that is Homeboy Industries. In *Barking to the Choir* he describes the role that compassion has in forming the relationships of the men and women he meets. He calls this Radical Kinship and says it is the thing every single human longs for. Pastor Jacqui Lewis at Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan speaks this way about Revolutionary Love—faith lived out that transform by love.

What did this happening really mean? What does following Jesus really look like? What happens when Jesus gets famous? Boyle writes, "We think that Jesus wants a fan club. Undulating crowds, gushing adorers, clamoring for autographs and sidling up to him, proclaiming, 'I'm your biggest fan. I have all your albums. I've never missed a concert!' As is often said, Jesus does not say in the gospel, 'Worship me,' but simply 'Follow me.'"<sup>2</sup>

"To just say, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, I'm your biggest fan,' causes him to stare at his watch, tap his feet, and order a double Glenlivet on the rocks with a twist. Fandom is of no interest to Jesus. What matters to him is the authentic following of a disciple. We all settle for saying, 'Jesus,' **but Jesus wants us to be in the world who he is...** Personally, I don't think he wants so much for us to wave palm fronds at his authority, but rather to locate our own—to be not so astonished at Jesus' authority but to live astonishingly, inhabiting our own power to live as he would."<sup>3</sup>

Sit with that for just a minute. Jesus isn't looking for fans. Jesus wants us to be in the world who he is. When we read this remarkable story in Mark's gospel, we are being invited into it both as people in desperate need of healing ourselves AND as people who have the power and authority as followers of Jesus to heal the world. We read this

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*, p. 195, emphasis mine

<sup>3</sup> Boyle, pp. 196-197

story and ask: Where is God in what possess me?<sup>4</sup> How are we going about the work of releasing one another from the demons hanging onto us? Are we living astonishingly, inhabiting our own power just as Jesus did? Or are we just fans at a concert looking for a great show and nothing more?

Listen to this: Boyle tells the story of traveling with Mario for a lecture in Washington state. He says whenever he is invited to lecture, he always brings a couple of friends from Homeboy Industries along with him, and this trip includes Mario and Bobby. He describes Mario as “among the most tattooed of any of our trainees...His arms are ‘sleeved out,’ neck blackened with the name of his barrio, and his entire face is covered but for the immediate area around his eyes, nose, and mouth. I had never been in public with him and was surprised by people’s reactions in the Burbank airport. People would widely sidestep him. Mothers would pull their kids in more tightly. The recoiling was pronounced and widespread. And yet, were you to ask anyone in Homeboy who is the kindest, gentlest person who works at Homeboy, they wouldn’t say me. The answer would most certainly be Mario. He is proof that only the soul that ventilates the world with tenderness has any chance of changing the world.”

The night of the lecture, Boyle invites Bobby and Mario to each speak for 5 minutes before he went up, and they tell their stories to the packed room. Mario was as nervous about speaking and possibly fielding questions as he had been about flying on an airplane for the first time in his life. When the Q&A started, the very first question was for him.

“‘You say you’re a father,’ the woman began, ‘and your son and daughter are starting to reach their teenage years...What advice do you give them?’

“She sat, and Mario was left alone to sift her words and find a response. He trembled some, and closed his eyes, then suddenly blurted out: ‘I just...’ As soon as those two words left his mouth, he retreated again to silence. Standing next to him, I could feel, sense, and see the sentence he was putting together in his mind, reducing him to a new, emotional setting. His eyes were closed and he was clutching the microphone. He finally opened his eyes and stretched his arm out toward the woman as if he were pleading with her. ‘I just...I just don’t want my kids to turn out to be like me.’ His last words felt squeezed out and his sobbing became more pronounced.

“The audience was silent, and not one of us made a move to fill it. The woman stood up again. Now it was her turn to cry as she pointed at Mario, her voice steely and

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<sup>4</sup> Question asked beautifully by Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3511>

certain, even through her tears. 'Why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out to be like you?' she said. 'You are gentle, you are kind, you are loving, you are wise.' She steadied herself, planted herself firmly. 'I hope your kids turn out to be like you.' There was not much of a pause before all one thousand attendees stood and began to clap. The ovation seemed to have no end. All Mario could do was hold his face in his hands, overwhelmed with emotion.

"Bobby and I each lightly placed a hand on his back as he gently sobbed and a roomful of strangers **returned him to himself**. As I looked at this crowd, it was unshakably clear that they, too, had been returned to themselves. It was all exquisitely mutual. An 'orphan' guiding us to the birth of a new inclusion. A lanky tattooed gang member befriending his own wound and inoculating this room from despising the wounded. Everyone recognizing themselves in the brokenness. All of us, a cry for help, judgment nowhere in sight. And, yes, entering, just right now, into the fullness of kinship. And I think that's the only praise God has any interest in."<sup>5</sup>

Where is God in what possess me?

How are we going about the work of releasing one another from the demons hanging onto us?

If we are doing this thing anything like right, then we are about the work of returning to ourselves, befriending our wounds, chasing after our own healing.

If we are doing this thing anything like right, then we are about the work of returning one another to fullness of self, honoring one another's woundedness, and chasing after the healing of the world.

It's inner work. It's outer work. It's sitting at the feet of Jesus and soaking in the power of his teaching. It's standing up beside him, seeing the ones the world makes a wide path around to ignore, and walking into the world's pain with radical kinship and revolutionary love. This is what it means to be in the fan club, on the way, claiming the name of Christ for ourselves. This is what we are about. This is the movement of Jesus.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Boyle, pp. 203-205, emphasis mine