

Mark 1:4-11
Genesis 1:1-5
January 7, 2024

Respect Yourself

For some reason, as I was in preparation for this week's message, I thought of the R&B/Gospel song by the Staples Singers, "Respect Yourself." It has been working on me in connection with the gospel reading for the day.

The premise of the song is that a person's inherent value, in the sight of God, is a sufficient source of self-respect, which is the source of good behavior and respect towards others. Respect for others *is* an expression of self-respect. The song is an admonishment to respect others, to good behavior.

"If you don't respect anybody that you run into, how in the world is anybody s'posed to respect you," that sort of thing. The question is why this text in Mark's gospel made me think of the song?

For the most part, with the exception of the visit to the temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old, the gospel story skips ahead from the events associated with the birth of Jesus, to the events associated with his career at the end of his life, the ministry in Galilee, and the ascent into his Passion, and Easter.

That story begins with John the Baptist, who was a prophetic-style preacher who led a movement that criticized the leaders and challenged the people to

holy living. As a symbol of inner cleansing and purification, he baptized those who were willing, when they joined up and became a part of the movement. Unlike the other gospels, Mark begins with the baptism of Jesus by John.

Some people love the Gospel of Mark because of its succinctness. It is the shortest of the gospels and unlike writers like Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, who wrote down every thought they had and somehow worked them into their stories, and unlike Matthew and Luke, who gave fuller accounts, Mark just gave the barest of detail.

Mark tells the story in rapid fashion. He does not set things up with accounts of the birth of Jesus. There is no discussion about what he was doing as a young man in his late teens and early twenties, except the reference about Joseph that he was a "Tekton," which is a craftsman who works with wood, sometimes called a carpenter.

In Mark there are no resurrection stories, beyond just the statement of fact. There is no Sermon on the Mount, which means no Beatitudes, no Golden Rule, and no Lord's Prayer, and there are only a few parables.

It is largely believed that Mark's is the first of the gospels to be written, and its beginning is not unlike the beginning of the Bible itself, only the Bible begins with Creation, the gospel represents the beginning of Redemption; the Gospel of Jesus, Christ, Son of God.

Mark is like the person who tells stories without setting them up but instead leads with the end. He seems to be in a hurry to get to the point, and the point is introduced by John in the following brief statement;

“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptized you with water, but he will baptized you with the Holy Spirit.”

What we learn is short and to the point; he came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. As he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. He heard a voice;

“You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well-pleased.”

And then, without any of the particulars that we find in Matthew’s gospel, he was led by that same Spirit into the wilderness and for forty days tempted by Satan, with wild animals, attended by angels.

For Mark, as opposed to Matthew, Luke, and John, the story really begins here, with this life-changing survivalist experience where the life of Jesus turns in the direction of the larger purpose, one that can only be called a divine mission.

Yet it was not a mission to conquer anything or to invent something that would change the world’s life, or

even to write a book that would be read for posterity. Rather, he begins with the experience of this voice that blesses him. And here is maybe where the connection to the song was made. For the energy that will make it possible for him to offer a sacrifice, on behalf of the world’s people, did not come to him after a harsh judgment, but after a beautiful affirmation of his precious value.

When he speaks for the first time, the first word is, “repent,” but not as a warning of impending punishment, but not, “repent or else, repent or perish,” rather, repent at the appearance of the divine realm, the Kingdom of Heaven is what he called it, which has come down for our Redemption and for our Salvation; because the best thing that ever happened is happening and heaven is near. That is something to get cleaned up for, it is a reason to be good.

We learn that the power that created the universe has visited us in a person . . . a person like you and me, who bears witness to what are the most important facets of our lives, and in the end that facet is summed in the arena of relationships.

Later, when Jesus responds to the question about the greatest command he says it is love in the highest sense. It is an unselfish love that is more concerned about others than it is the self. The presence of the God in this way is the source of our self-understanding, of our set of values; honor, humility, integrity, goodwill, compassion, the readiness to forgive; it is the lens through which we see other

people, who can be seen as friends to be respected rather than enemies to struggle against and overcome.

The Presence of God is the companion of our faith, which drives us away from the rabbit hole of self-obsession and towards the ideal life of service and sacrifice for which Jesus himself is the supreme example.

It is the proclaiming of Grace - that grace is *God's nature*, which takes hardships and turns them into lessons learned; and takes our failures and not only forgives them and heals and restores us but somehow also miraculously turns them into impossible good, like when the cross of Jesus itself, the worst thing that ever happened, became the means of salvation, the best thing that ever happened.

In the gospel the call to repentance is a call to self-respect; or in the song the call to self-respect is clearly a call to repentance, because it comes on the heels of the great message that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, which is first and primarily not a warning to avoid punishment but a to-good-to-be-true promise that we too, along with Jesus are beloved children of God.

The Holy spirit is the presence of God in us and in our midst, and John said that Jesus came to baptize us in it, which means that even when all our instincts tell us, and all the powers of judgment that we can muster, tell us that it isn't so, even then, we are immersed in

the presence of God; to our liberation, to our healing, and to the resurrection of our lives.

“Repent,” Jesus will say, show yourself and the world some respect.

“Respect yourself,” the song says, repent of the failure to love.

Anyway, I know to whom I speak, an audience that does not need to be told these things, yet it *is* the way the story begins, and it is also the first Sunday of the New Year, the Epiphany of God.

Prayer of Dedication for Officers and Deacons

We have a new deacon this year. Richard Brown has been elected and has agreed to serve in this capacity. We welcome him to this ministry and commit to support him, as well as to the other deacons and all these church officers, as they provide servant leadership for our congregation.

Prayer

We ask your blessing on all who have been named this morning, for the service and ministry to which they have dedicated themselves.

Give them health of mind and body so they may serve with discernment and strength. Make them fertile ground for your inspiration and love. Comfort them when they question themselves and their ministry. Grant them grace so they may share your wisdom.

We ask, Lord God, that you pour generously into their lives your Holy Spirit; fill them with your love and compassion, so that they may see their brothers and sisters as you see them, and that they are equipped to carry out the duties that they have been appointed to fulfill.

We dedicate ourselves to support them in their work. We ask this in the name of Jesus, and for his glory. Amen.

The Presentation at the Temple - Simeon and Anna

Luke 2:21-40

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Jesus Presented in the Temple

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

30

For my eyes have seen your salvation,

31

which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

32

a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

33 The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

The Boy Jesus at the Temple

41 Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it.

44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him,

they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.

48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

49 “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

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