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Is There Room in the Market for Jesus?

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Text: Mark 6:47-56

As I meditated on this morning's text over the last week, I agonized once again over the ineptitude of the disciples in the picture that Mark paints. As usual, the disciples come up the dummies. It makes me sick to think that they could mistake Jesus for a ghost ... it especially makes me sick when I remember that I like to think that I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ! Mark's gospel often outrages any inane sense of superiority that may be raising its ugly head in my life. Mark angers us if we dare to identify ourselves with the disciples of Jesus, and I'm afraid that that's an identity we can hardly deny.

This morning's gospel is full of surprises that may outrage us. While we discover that the disciples mistake their master for a ghost, we are shocked to see that Galileans from Gennesaret don't only recognize him ... Mark tells us that they recognize him *immediately!* Jesus' closest companions didn't know him as he walked to them on the sea, while sordid strangers were able to see Jesus from a distance as he stepped out of a boat! And that isn't the last of the surprises.

We find that Jesus lands in Galilee to perform miracles among unclean people in an unclean place. It is in the marketplace that the sick are made well. Mark tells us two things about the marketplace that we may want to keep in mind. The first is that purification needs to follow any visit to the marketplace. The second is that the marketplace is the place where the pharisees receive their salutations. In other words, we find our precious Jesus smack dab in the middle of a sleazy establishment marketing miracles to godless Galileans. Mark

breaks the proverbial camel's back with this pericope ... at least Matthew had enough good sense to omit this marketplace business.

But our gospel text for this morning comes from Mark, and we need to reckon with the many questions that may come to mind as God confronts us with these words: questions like, how can we be sure that miracles aren't wasted on self-seeking souls? How do we know that pearls aren't being cast before swine? Is the gospel something to be dispensed in a marketplace? What is the gospel all about anyways? These are all good questions; they're questions that we all ask at different times, in different places.

These questions were especially haunting for me during my experience of internship. It was during internship that I first discovered that many people view baptism, marriage, and pastoral care as a commodity up for grabs in a religious and cultural marketplace. As I came to understand this common conception, I often wondered what place the gospel had in this market mentality. Everytime I got a call from some young couple wanting to make it "legal", I had to ask myself, "Is this what the gospel is all about?" Every Friday afternoon, as my confirmation class poured into the church, brimming over with indifference about me and my carefully prepared lesson, I had to ask myself, "Is this what the gospel is all about?" Every time Oliver's funeral home called to ask if I would bury some unchurched stranger, I had to ask myself, "Is this what the gospel is all about?" I must confess that I often felt as if I were offering some pious product in some spiritual supermarket. People looked to the church for services for reasons that were as self-seeking and manipulative as you could ever imagine. These questions I asked myself were good questions, because they were honest and heart wrenching questions asked in the midst of the marketplace.

Mark's gospel outrages me because Jesus' presence in the marketplace reminds me of my presence in the marketplace, and the marketplace made me angry. The marketplace threatened to discredit the gospel by viewing it as one of many services. The marketplace threatened to devalue the gospel by seizing it as a good deal. But worst of all, the marketplace threatened to destroy the gospel by breeding a cynicism that put that very gospel word at risk for me.

It's fair to ask Jesus what he was doing in the marketplace, because we have to ask ourselves the same question. We have to ask ourselves if we really want to put the gospel at risk by letting it loose in the marketplace. And while the academic answer is easy enough, we really find the question pulling at our heartstrings when we find people taking advantage of the love we offer them in the name of Jesus. If we wish to serve Jesus, we will find that the marketplace will drive us to our knees in search of an answer.

I know that that was the case for me. I had to question the wisdom of risking the gospel's integrity in the marketplace. I had to ask God what it meant to be a bearer of the gospel. I had to ask God if we really ought to risk the gospel. And God gave me some answers in some heartwarming ways. A widow decided to make our church her home after I buried her husband. A couple took membership classes after I baptized their five year old son. Two of our confirmands made a special effort to say goodbye to me before I left and another said thanks for a warming experience of community she had. These saints and their stories told me that the gospel is all about risk. Love that demands guarantees is no love at all. But God's love dares to risk in the face of seemingly hopeless situations. And that same love managed to shatter the cynicism of an intern who often felt that the church was a place used and abused by the self seeking.

The gospel lesson for today may shock and outrage us, but as we come to grips with the risking nature of the gospel, this same gospel helps us to understand who we are as the people of God. If risking is a quality of the gospel we bear, then risk is a part of our identity as God's children. Many of you may be well aware of the risking character of the gospel. Your faith may alienate you from family and friends who just can't understand your fascination with a life of faith. But even while you live a life of risking, you may also be aware of the fact that risking is neither an easy nor natural way of living. Courage quickly succumbs to the seduction of security. All of us have a tendency to make our lives as comfortable as we can.

This tendency makes itself manifest in many ways in the life of the church. We may be content with speaking the gospel with those of like socio-economic status. We may neglect the responsibility we bear as Christians in our society. We may

turn a blind eye to those who make us uncomfortable. But when we deny that our identity as people of God entails risk, we soon find ourselves locked in a Christian ghetto. Soon our worldview is framed by church windows and colored by stained glass. And the saddest truth of such a situation is that we rob both ourselves and others in living that sort of a life. The gospel lesson tells us that when the disciples stepped out of the boat, and into the lives of the Galileans, the people were able to see Jesus. Today's gospel lesson envisages a people of God who are able to take leave from the security of Christian ghettos in order to set free the gospel in a hurting world.

It's very easy for Christians to socialize with other Christians, to work with other Christians, to do business with other Christians ... but we need to remember that in our gospel lesson Jesus saves in the marketplace. The gospel word is a risking word that is meant to heal, soothe, and renew the lives of all people, even those that alienate, frighten, or nauseate us. It's our joy as Christians to be able to carry that gospel word into the marketplaces of our worlds. May God bless you as you relish the risk that draws you into the life-giving grace of the gospel. Amen.