

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Four

Throughout Leap of Faith, we will walk together through the entire story of the ministry of Jesus, at least as it is told by Mark. Mark is one of the early followers of Jesus. He may or may not have known Jesus himself, but he was probably a traveling companion of the apostle Simon Peter. Simon Peter never wrote a history of Jesus himself, but John Mark collected and wrote down Simon Peter's story. I'm sure that as you read you'll see that Peter's perspective comes out strongly, and that it's a really valuable perspective to have. Mark's gospel (which means 'good news') was the first one written, about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Incidentally, it's also the shortest. That means that, when we read it over 40 days, each day's passage should be of a quite manageable size. The size does vary a bit, as I've sectioned it in such a way as to make good sense of the stories, rather than just dividing it into equal-sized bits.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). As I've worked on this guide, I've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped me to do what I most want to do: enter into the story myself. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with Jesus?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply to you, to your six, and to our church.

March 10

Mark 9: 14-29—the healing of a demon-possessed boy

¹⁴ At the foot of the mountain they found a great crowd surrounding the other disciples, as some teachers of religious law were arguing with them. ¹⁵ The crowd watched Jesus in awe as he came toward them, and then they ran to greet him. ¹⁶ "What is all this arguing about?" he asked. ¹⁷ One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, "Teacher, I brought my son for you to heal him. He can't speak because he is possessed by an evil spirit that won't let him talk. ¹⁸ And whenever this evil spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground and makes him foam at the mouth and grind his teeth and become rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn't do it." ¹⁹ Jesus said to them, "You faithless people! How long must I be with you until you believe? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." ²⁰ So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth. ²¹ "How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father. He replied, "Since he was very small. ²² The evil spirit often makes him fall into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us. Do something if you can." ²³ "What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes." ²⁴ The father instantly replied, "I do believe, but help me not to doubt!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that the crowd of onlookers was growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. "Spirit of deafness and muteness," he said, "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!" ²⁶ Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy lay there motionless, and he appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, "Why couldn't we cast out that evil spirit?" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer."

Points of Interest:

- 'The crowd watched Jesus in awe'—Who knows, but perhaps the people are in awe because Jesus' clothes are still dazzlingly white. The book of Exodus, chapter 34, tells us that whenever Moses came away from speaking with the Lord, his face would glow for a while. Perhaps Jesus has a similar heavenly glow to him as he returns.
- 'What is all this arguing about?'—Isn't it so often true that what is being fought over gets lost in the midst of the argument? Jesus comes down into a chaotic scene in which he can't even tell what the disciples and the religious teachers are arguing about. Perhaps the disciples and the religious teachers are arguing about methods for casting out demons. Perhaps the religious teachers are using the disciples' failure as a way to fight against Jesus' legitimacy. Whatever the case, the actual, helpless demon-possessed boy is lost in the shuffle as the disciples and teachers argue. It is so easy to let arguments over turf and over methods get in the way of helping hurting people, and it is such a great pity when it does. Although Jesus asks what the argument is about, he doesn't actually get himself entangled in the substance of the argument. Rather, he goes straight to the original matter: the healing of the boy.
- 'How long has this been happening?'—Jesus asks a little bit more about the boy's condition. Knowing more about exactly what's going on with the boy apparently helps him to treat the problem effectively. Often, when we are praying for someone, especially when it appears that their problem is influenced by an evil spirit, it's worth it to ask a few questions to discover what we are dealing with.
- "What do you mean, 'If I can'?"—The father thinks that the limiting factor is Jesus' ability. Jesus responds that the question is not whether or not he has the power, but whether or not others have the faith. Earlier on, Jesus says, "You faithless people!" Apparently, the whole environment here is one of faithlessness. No one, not the father, nor the disciples, nor certainly the religious teachers have demonstrated faith that this boy can be healed. Perhaps the intrusion of the religious teachers into the situation has disrupted the faithfulness of the people involved.
- 'This kind can be cast out only by prayer'—it seems that before Jesus arrives no one has even prayed during this attempt to cast out the evil spirit. Imagine what it would have been like for the disciples when they first began to cast out demons. They must have been totally reliant on God: "Oh, Lord, please, please, please, give us the ability to cast out this demon. We know we can't do it without you," must have been their feeling if not their actual words. Perhaps by now, casting out demons has become a little old hat. They know they can do it; it just takes a little laying on of hands. They've become confident in their own abilities, maybe even their own techniques, rather than on the power of God. They follow their time-tested technique, but it doesn't work. They've forgotten the most important ingredient: faithful prayer to God.
- 'I do believe, but help me not to doubt!'—Jesus says that this kind of spirit comes out only by prayer, but Mark makes no mention of Jesus praying. Who prays the prayer that causes the demon to leave? The only thing it could be is the father saying, 'I do believe, but help me not to doubt.' This confession of faith and cry for help to have faith is the kind of prayer Jesus loves to answer. Jesus doesn't expect perfect faith: he only expects the man to cry out in dependence on him. We don't need to have perfectly phrased prayers or have all our ducks in a row before we pray. All Jesus expects is for us to come to him with what we have. Just like Jesus could multiply the 5 loaves to feed a crowd, he could multiply the man's faith once given the invitation.
- 'he appeared to be dead'—Jesus has told his disciples that he will be killed and rise again, and they don't understand his words. Here, Jesus tries to give them a little picture of the resurrection to bolster their imagination and their faith. Jesus predicts that he will suffer, die, and rise again. The boy suffers at the hand of the spirit. He appears to be dead. And when Jesus touches him, he rises up from the ground. Just like Jesus revives this father's son, God the Father will revive his own son.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The father brings the boy to Jesus to be healed, but it looks very much like Jesus has killed the boy instead. Sometimes, when we bring a problem to Jesus it seems to get worse rather than better. That doesn't necessarily mean that something is going wrong. The example of this boy shows us that sometimes the path to healing goes through death to resurrection. If you have brought a problem to Jesus, and it's gotten worse, ask him to see it through to resurrection.
- *For your six:* All that Jesus needs to do something amazing in a person's life is a little starter faith. All the father can do is offer a prayer that Jesus would help him to believe, and Jesus responds willingly and abundantly. Pray that your six would have enough faith to ask Jesus for more. Ask Jesus to respond to them as lavishly as he does to this man.
- *For our church:* Pray that our church would become more and more a place of prayerful dependence on God. We don't want to rely on our ministry techniques, but on God's power. We want to do the things that only happen by prayer.

March 11

Mark 9: 30-49—the greatest and the least

³⁰ Leaving that region, they traveled through Galilee. Jesus tried to avoid all publicity ³¹ in order to spend more time with his disciples and teach them. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed. He will be killed, but three days later he will rise from the dead." ³² But they didn't understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask him what he meant. ³³ After they arrived at Capernaum, Jesus and his disciples settled in the house where they would be staying. Jesus asked them, "What were you discussing out on the road?" ³⁴ But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down and called the twelve disciples over to him. Then he said, "Anyone who wants to be the first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." ³⁶ Then he put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes my Father who sent me." ³⁸ John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't one of our group." ³⁹ "Don't stop him!" Jesus said. "No one who performs miracles in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Anyone who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I assure you, that person will be rewarded. ⁴² "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who trusts in me to lose faith, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around the neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter heaven with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell with two hands. ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter heaven with only one foot than to be thrown into hell with two feet. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It is better to enter the Kingdom of God half blind than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out.' ⁴⁹ "For everyone will be purified with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other."

Points of Interest:

- 'they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest'—Jesus is telling them that he is going to be betrayed and killed, and they respond by arguing about which one of them is the greatest. It seems a bit calloused and inappropriate. Why are they arguing about greatness now? Are they trying to decide who will succeed Jesus when he dies? Or perhaps the whole topic just goes over their head, and they are arguing about greatness because of their recent experiences: James, John, and Peter may be saying to the others something like, 'We saw something really cool, but we can't tell you what it is,' or, 'I guess you had a little trouble casting out demons when we were gone.' Competitiveness has sprung up amongst the disciples.
- 'Anyone who wants to be the first . . . '—Perhaps to their surprise, Jesus does not rebuke them for wanting greatness. He encourages their desire to be first, but tells them that they

- are going about it all wrong. This is the second such paradox statement we've seen recently. Earlier, Jesus said that anyone who tries to save their life will lose it. Here, he says if you want to be first you have to be last. According to Jesus, on some of our most fundamental human drives—the drive for life, and the drive for greatness—our instincts send us in exactly the wrong direction. Stated bluntly, our instinct is to fight and grab for these things. Jesus asks us to put ourselves in a place where he can give them to us instead.
- 'he put a little child among them'—They've been arguing about who is greatest, and Jesus tells them how to be great: serve the least. Then he gives them an opportunity at greatness, by giving them a chance to serve a little child. In the world's way of looking at things, if you want to be great, you ignore the least and you curry the favor of the great. You increase your own importance by being seen among important people. Maybe James, John, and Peter thought they were great now, because they could do a little name-dropping: 'James, do you remember that thing Elijah said when we were with him?' A little child is completely inconsequential in this way of thinking: she can give you nothing; she has no status to confer on you; and you get no credit or help from serving her. In Jesus' mind, the best possible path toward greatness is paying attention to someone like this. Welcoming a no-status person like this child gives you an open freeway to the Father. Either they don't believe his recipe for greatness, or it's a little less appetizing to them than the old way. None of them take Jesus up on the offer. So, Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed the greatest among them by welcoming the child himself.
 - 'he isn't one of our group'—the disciples encounter a non-union exorcist. Again, their priority in their dealings with this man seems to be to maintain their own greatness: 'I'm sorry, but only we are authorized to cast out demons.' Ironically, they have just demonstrated some difficulty casting out a demon, but this man seems to have no trouble. If they knew what true greatness is about, they would have welcomed the man. With so much less contact with Jesus, he nonetheless had the faith to go around casting out demons. They should have honored his faith, and they should have looked for ways to raise him up though he was less credentialed than them. Instead, they tried to protect their monopoly. Jesus says that it's not about competition; it's about expanding the kingdom of God. Anyone who does any small service in advancing the kingdom of God should be rewarded and encouraged.
 - 'But if anyone causes one of these little ones who trusts in me to lose faith'—'These little ones who trust in me,' seems to refer to both the literal child and to this unofficial disciple. The man casting out demons is little, at least in their perspective, because he has less status among the disciples. With this 'little one' particular, the disciples have actually put up a barrier to faith: they've told him that casting out demons in Jesus' name is wrong. By using the power that comes with being an apostle to their own benefit in this way, they've moved onto very dangerous ground. Jesus basically says, 'Next time you think about doing something like that again, commit suicide instead; it's less harmful.' If they really want to be great, they should do it by encouraging the faith of others. The way they're going about greatness is prohibiting the kingdom and bringing them lower and lower.
 - 'If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off'—Jesus isn't literally recommending amputation. It's not really our limbs that cause us to sin; remember, Jesus says in chapter 7 that, 'It is the thought-life that defiles you' not the body. Jesus is using a very violent analogy to tell the disciples just how serious their error is. The really cause of their sin is their pride; and Jesus is saying that they need to do something drastic to get rid of that pride. We might prefer something like, 'If your hand causes you to sin, slap it,' or, 'If your hand causes you to sin, hide it behind your back.' We tend to treat sin lightly. Jesus recommends that we treat sin drastically, permanently, and immediately. We want to excuse our sin or explain it in order to protect ourselves. We've got our priorities dangerously wrong: we might avoid a little harm, only to lead toward greater harm in the end. Jesus says that the best way to protect ourselves is by doing anything we can to get rid of our sin. What are the habitual sins that you tend to coddle? What would it look like to treat it drastically, permanently, and immediately instead? Ask Jesus for the strength you need to cut sin off at the root.
 - 'where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out.'—a quote from the prophet Isaiah, ch. 66:24.

- 'have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other'—This is a particularly difficult metaphor of Jesus' to understand, and, unfortunately, the disciples don't ask Jesus what he means. For what it's worth, it's my opinion that the salt is judgment. Jesus is telling the disciples that they should judge themselves—that is, treat their own sin seriously and get rid of it—and be at peace with one another. The disciples have been doing the opposite. They've been at peace with themselves—each of them thinking that he is pretty great—and judging others: they've competed with one another, judged the little child as unworthy, and judged the non-union exorcist as invalid. They've been trying to season everyone else, when they're the ones who have lost their taste. If they don't reverse the flow and deal with their own faults instead, they will end up in serious trouble.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus wants you to be first—and the best way to be first is to put yourself last. Ask God for the grace and the faith to welcome and encourage others, especially those who apparently have little to offer you.
- *For your six:* Are there ways your six are already trying to do the work of the kingdom in Jesus' name? Jesus says in this passage that you don't have to be 'part of the group' to begin to do works of faith. Encourage your six in ways you see them advancing the kingdom, and ask God to reward them for it—even if what they're doing is a small thing, like giving a cup of water.
- *For our church:* The disciples try to bolster their egos through competition, but Jesus warns that competition sends us the exact opposite direction of greatness. It's easy to fall into an attitude of competition. Ask God to protect us from a spirit of competition, both within our church and with other churches.

March 12

Mark 10: 1-12—on divorce and marriage

Then Jesus left Capernaum and went southward to the region of Judea and into the area east of the Jordan River. As always there were the crowds, and as usual he taught them.² Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?"³ "What did Moses say about divorce?" Jesus asked them.⁴ "Well, he permitted it," they replied. "He said a man merely has to write his wife an official letter of divorce and send her away."⁵ But Jesus responded, "He wrote those instructions only as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness.⁶ But God's plan was seen from the beginning of creation, for 'He made them male and female.'⁷ 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife,⁸ and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one,⁹ let no one separate them, for God has joined them together."¹⁰ Later, when he was alone with his disciples in the house, they brought up the subject again.¹¹ He told them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her.¹² And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery."

Points of Interest:

- 'tried to trap him'—What is the trap the Pharisees have set? The last time we heard about divorce, it was regarding Herod and Herodias' marriage. John the Baptist was thrown in jail and eventually beheaded for calling their marriage unlawful. Undoubtedly, John criticized Herod's marriage because it involved incest (marrying a brother's wife) as well as divorce. Nonetheless, the Pharisees are trying to lure Jesus on to dangerous ground—the last prophet who spoke up about divorce was killed. If Jesus answers as strongly as John, he may put himself in danger also. If he doesn't, the Pharisees can criticize him for softening his response for political reasons.
- 'a man merely has to write his wife an official letter of divorce'—In Jewish culture, only the man had the right to divorce. Moses' law about an official letter was actually a legal protection for women. Before Moses' law, husbands would dismiss wives, denying them any support, but the wives were still legally contracted to the husbands and couldn't marry

anyone else. This official letter would allow the woman the chance to start again rather than being a lonely outcast for her whole life.

- 'God's plan was seen from the beginning'—While the Pharisees question focuses on what is allowed, Jesus re-frames the discussion on what is best. He quotes the book of Genesis 1: 27 and 2: 24 which describe the relationships between humans and God and men and women as they are supposed to be: both men and women are created in the image of God; and they are meant to be partners to one another. Divorce is a separation, a sending away. Marriage is supposed to be about joining together. The Pharisees treat divorce almost flippantly: it's merely a matter of writing a letter. Jesus doesn't want divorce to be trivialized in this way. He presents it as what many of us have experienced it to be: a marriage gone horribly, painfully wrong.
- 'send her away'—Jesus speaks so strongly against divorce because so often it comes from the exact opposite spirit to the one he was recommending in the previous teaching. Jesus tells us to judge ourselves and be at peace with others. Especially in a situation in which only the man had the ability to begin divorce proceedings, divorce lends itself toward being at peace with oneself and judging others. Jesus recommends that we cut off our own hand if it causes us to sin; these divorced men were instead cutting off their wives. Of course, situations like abuse, infidelity, or being rejected by your spouse require more sensitive, complex treatment; and the Bible does indeed discuss some of these more complex divorce situations elsewhere. In this passage, however, Jesus strongly warns us against putting off the blame for a failed marriage on our spouses. So often, in the midst of a fight, it is easy to be at peace with ourselves and judge the other. A situation of divorce can often be an entire relationship—and our most intimate relationship—in which each is judging the other and absolving himself or herself. It's tempting to think that sending one another away would be the easiest thing. Jesus responds that it will only create a tearing apart and more hardship. It's far better, early on, to cut off the things that cause you to sin against your spouse.
- 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery'—this verse is very sobering, and it should give any of us pause before we divorce and re-marry. It may be helpful, though, in understanding what Jesus means to think of the Herod and Herodias situation in the backdrop. Herod and Herodias were both married to other people but conducting a very famous affair. Then, they each dropped their spouses (as a cosmopolitan aristocrat Herodias, though a woman, could get away with it) and married one another. They had treated their previous marriages as temporary and disposable. Jesus is saying here that the legally covering for their actions doesn't change the reality: they had wronged their previous spouses, and their previous spouses still had a better claim on them. Divorce does not legitimize unfaithfulness.
- 'And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery'—Jesus here equalizes the relationship between women and men. The woman has the same rights, the same choices, and the same responsibility as the man.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Not many of us in our society have escaped being intimately affected by divorce. Jesus speaks some hard words here about divorce which ought to be taken seriously. At the same time, it is extremely important to know that Jesus' grace extends over divorce also. Divorce isn't blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-29, done on March 9th); Jesus has the authority and the willingness to forgive any sins we have done associate with it. If this teaching on divorce has struck you hard, you may want to talk more about your thoughts and feelings with a trusted follower of Jesus. Perhaps you need to ask God's forgiveness for ways you have blamed your spouse and been at peace with yourself—whether that has led to divorce or not. You may also want to ask Jesus for healing for the way you were 'sent away,' either by your former spouse, or by your parents if you are a child of divorced parents.
- *For your six:* For any of your six who are affected by divorce, ask for healing and forgiveness for them. Pray against the power of divorce to continue to harm them, and pray against it being a barrier to them seeking Jesus.

- *For our church:* Pray that God will bless and protect the marriages in our church. Ask God to give all of us who are married the ability to love our spouses well and the life-giving experience of being two united as one.

March 13

Mark 10: 13-31—the little children and the rich man

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them, but the disciples told them not to bother him.¹⁴ But when Jesus saw what was happening, he was very displeased with his disciples. He said to them, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.¹⁵ I assure you, anyone who doesn’t have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God.”¹⁶ Then he took the children into his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them. As he was starting out on a trip, a man came running up to Jesus, knelt down, and asked, “Good Teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?”¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked. “Only God is truly good.¹⁹ But as for your question, you know the commandments: ‘Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not testify falsely. Do not cheat. Honor your father and mother.’”²⁰ “Teacher,” the man replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments since I was a child.”²¹ Jesus felt genuine love for this man as he looked at him. “You lack only one thing,” he told him. “Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²² At this, the man’s face fell, and he went sadly away because he had many possessions.²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for rich people to get into the Kingdom of God!”²⁴ This amazed them. But Jesus said again, “Dear children, it is very hard to get into the Kingdom of God.²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”²⁶ The disciples were astounded. “Then who in the world can be saved?” they asked.²⁷ Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God.”²⁸ Then Peter began to mention all that he and the other disciples had left behind. “We’ve given up everything to follow you,” he said.²⁹ And Jesus replied, “I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News,³⁰ will receive now in return, a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—with persecutions. And in the world to come they will have eternal life.³¹ But many who seem to be important now will be the least important then, and those who are considered least here will be the greatest then.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘but the disciples told them not to bother him’—Two passages ago, Jesus told the disciples that the key to being welcomed by him and the Father is welcoming little children. But here the disciples are again, sending away little ones. Jesus is indignant with the disciples, and he increases the stakes. Not only do you have to welcome children, but you have to imitate them to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It takes faith like a child’s—open, expectant, and dependent—to get to the kingdom of heaven. After the very adult topic of divorce, Jesus brings our attention back to the simple faith of a child.
- ‘Why do you call me good? Only God is truly good’—Although he happens to be correct this time in calling Jesus good, Jesus calls into question the man’s definition of the word ‘good.’ He doesn’t know Jesus is God, but he calls him good. Perhaps he also thinks of himself as ‘a good person.’ He’s done all of the right things, and perhaps he is depending on that, on his goodness, to bring him eternal life. He has indeed done well. He claims to have kept all of the commandments Jesus lists since he was a child, and Jesus doesn’t contradict his claim. Rather, the man’s fervor provokes genuine love from Jesus. And yet, his own moral accomplishments are not enough.
- ‘You lack only one thing’—What does he lack? One way to describe what he lacks is a relationship with God. The commandments he has obeyed are 6 of the famous 10 commandments. The 10 commandments can be split into two different sub-categories: those having to do with love of your neighbor, and those having to do with love of God. The man has obeyed all 6 of the commandments about loving his neighbor, but apparently he has

overlooked the 4 that have to do with loving God. How can he have eternal life? By having a relationship with God. How can he gain that relationship with God? The same way everyone else has: by leaving what they have and following Jesus.

- 'How hard it is for rich people to get into the kingdom of God'—Although Jesus says that it is impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God, he singles out rich people. This young man is, in fact, unique among the people we have seen in the story of Mark so far. When Jesus called James, John, Simon, Andrew, and Levi to follow him, they all immediately left what they had behind. Either this rich man decides not to do it at all, or he at least needs time to think about it. Why is it harder for this rich man? The cost is the same for everyone: they have to leave what they have. But it looks bigger, because he has more to leave. The idea that he is leaving more is somewhat of an illusion. As Jesus says, there's no benefit in even gaining the whole world but losing your life (Mark 8: 36). No matter how much money this man has, it's worth less than his life. But it feels to him like so much more than the others are leaving behind.

Another way to look at it is that it takes the faith of a child to enter the kingdom of God. People with means have a hard time being children. They are used to being in charge, getting things done, being the people who have the means to accomplish what they want. Being like a child means receiving things as a gift from God—the only one who can make eternal life possible. Rich people are used to doing things on their own power.

- 'a hundred times over'—Jesus said two passages ago that no one who did something so small as giving a cup of water would lose their reward. The disciples have given up everything, and Jesus says they will be rewarded generously—a hundred times over in this life, besides eternal life in the age to come. Now, none of the disciples became real estate magnates during their life time. They did not possess, in the traditional sense, 100 times more land by the time they died than they did before they started following. But, they also never lacked for a place to stay, food to eat, or community. Jesus says anyone who does God's will is his family (3: 35, March 9th). The disciples have become a part of that larger family, and it is that family that gives them houses to live in and food to eat. When they went on their mission, they stayed in the houses they were welcomed into. They will continue to live that way, and Jesus promises it is a rich life, much better than depending on what you can gain for yourself.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus says that no one can enter the kingdom of God without the faith of a child. Ask Jesus for the power to become a child.
- *For your six:* Sometimes, like for the rich man here, the price tag of following Jesus can feel dauntingly high. For each of your six, it will take the faith to leave behind something they depend on if they are going to follow Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to give them the faith and insight they need to respond to Jesus' invitation. Ask that they will not go away sadly when given the choice.
- *For our church:* Ask God to make us more and more a community of 100-fold blessing. Look for opportunities to rely on others in our midst and to give to them.

March 14

Mark 10: 32-52—true greatness, the healing of blind Bartimaeus

³² They were now on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with dread and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him in Jerusalem. ³³ "When we get to Jerusalem," he told them, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. ³⁴ They will mock him, spit on him, beat him with their whips, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again." ³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came over and spoke to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do us a favor." ³⁶ "What is it?" he asked. ³⁷ "In your glorious Kingdom, we want to sit in places of honor next to you," they said, "one at your right and the other at your left." ³⁸ But Jesus answered, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from

the bitter cup of sorrow I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?"³⁹ "Oh yes," they said, "we are able!" And Jesus said, "You will indeed drink from my cup and be baptized with my baptism,⁴⁰ but I have no right to say who will sit on the thrones next to mine. God has prepared those places for the ones he has chosen."⁴¹ When the ten other disciples discovered what James and John had asked, they were indignant.⁴² So Jesus called them together and said, "You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them.⁴³ But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all.⁴⁵ For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many."⁴⁶ And so they reached Jericho. Later, as Jesus and his disciples left town, a great crowd was following. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) was sitting beside the road as Jesus was going by.⁴⁷ When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus from Nazareth was nearby, he began to shout out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁸ "Be quiet!" some of the people yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁹ When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, "Tell him to come here." So they called the blind man. "Cheer up," they said. "Come on, he's calling you!"⁵⁰ Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus.⁵¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. "Teacher," the blind man said, "I want to see."⁵² And Jesus said to him, "Go your way. Your faith has healed you." And instantly the blind man could see! Then he followed Jesus down the road.

Points of Interest:

- 'The disciples were filled with dread and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear'—Perhaps Jesus' words about being killed are starting to sink in. At the very least, everyone is aware that they are leaving Galilee, their home turf, and moving on to the home turf of the religious leaders with whom Jesus has clashed so much. In response to their fear, Jesus repeats his predictions in far greater detail than he has before. Jesus wants them to know when it happens that it was not a surprise: no matter how bad it looks, it is all going according to plan.
- 'they were indignant'—It seems that the disciples were not indignant because of James' and John's rudeness, but because they felt that James and John had outmaneuvered them. This is the second time that Jesus' prediction of his death has led to squabbles about greatness amongst the disciples.
- 'we want you do us a favor'—James and John are behaving a bit like children who say, 'Daddy, will you promise to say yes to whatever I ask you.' Nonetheless, Jesus hears their request.
- 'You don't know what you are asking'—James and John naively ask for the honor that Jesus will have in his glorious kingdom. They don't know that you can only get the reward by passing through the suffering: you can't have resurrection without death. Again, Jesus doesn't rebuke them for wanting honor. He says that they are going about it in the wrong way. Although they aren't ready yet to follow Jesus in this way, he promises them that they will someday be able.
- 'What do you want me to do for you?'—Jesus says that what makes him great is that he is a servant. Then, he demonstrates his servanthood by asking the question of a servant: what can I do for you? In fact, he is even willing to serve James and John, but he cannot give them what they want.
- 'Be quiet!' some of the people yelled at him—Bartimaeus is another little one. Just like the disciples tried to stop the children from getting to Jesus, the people try to get Bartimaeus to shut up. Jesus welcomes Bartimaeus just like he does the children.
- 'Then he followed Jesus down the road'—Jesus tells Bartimaeus to go his way, and Bartimaeus follows Jesus. Jesus' way has become Bartimaeus' way. Bartimaeus wants to be close to the man who has the power and the care to heal him.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* You've been asking Jesus to do something for you for almost 4 weeks now. If Jesus has not answered you yet, follow Bartimaeus' example: ask louder. If Jesus has answered you, consider what it would mean to follow Jesus down the road. Where does Jesus want to lead you?
- *For your six:* Jesus wants you to be great, and he wants your six to be served. Look for opportunities to do something kind or helpful for your six today. Ask Jesus if he has an idea for you.
- *For our church:* As a church, we have the same spirit as James and John. We like to say, 'We are able!' to the calling Jesus gives us. Also, like James and John, we are not actually currently able to do all of the things we have said we will do. Ask Jesus to make us able to do what he has called us to do.

March 15

Mark 11: 1-11—Palm Sunday

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ² "Go into that village over there," he told them, "and as soon as you enter it, you will see a colt tied there that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, "The Lord needs it and will return it soon.' " ⁴ The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside a house. ⁵ As they were untying it, some bystanders demanded, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They said what Jesus had told them to say, and they were permitted to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it.⁸ Many in the crowd spread their coats on the road ahead of Jesus, and others cut leafy branches in the fields and spread them along the way. ⁹ He was in the center of the procession, and the crowds all around him were shouting,

"Praise God!

Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Bless the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Praise God in highest heaven!"

¹¹ So Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. He looked around carefully at everything, and then he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he went out to Bethany with the twelve disciples.

Points of Interest:

- 'They said what Jesus had told them to say'—Jesus gives them a small miracle of being provided a donkey. This little miracle is a little reminder of the trustworthiness of Jesus' words. It's especially important in the following days that they remember and believe Jesus' words.
- 'the colt'—Jesus is self-consciously fulfilling a prophecy about the Messiah. It was written by the prophet Zechariah (9:9): 'Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—even on a donkey's colt.'
- 'spread their coats on the road'—They are using their own coats to lay down a carpet for Jesus' arrival. It honors Jesus—even the feet of his donkey shouldn't have to touch the ground—and it keeps down the dust. This action refers back to the Isaiah quote from the very first passage: 'Prepare a pathway of the Lord's coming!'
- 'Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'—the crowds are shouting Psalm 118. Psalm 118 was a common psalm to be sung during the period of the Passover; so it would have been on the minds of the crowd. The crowds are welcoming Jesus in a similar way to how all pilgrims were welcomed, but there is an anticipation of something great in Jesus' arrival that is extraordinary. The crowds add on to the psalm the phrase about David's kingdom, showing that they know Jesus' lineage and that they are expecting something kingly and David-like of him.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The disciples who went for the colt found things just as Jesus said they would be. Ask Jesus if he has any directions for you today. Follow his instructions, and see what happens.
- *For your six:* Ask Jesus to give your six small miracles to show the trustworthiness of his words. Pray that these small miracles would lead them deeper into faith.
- *For our church:* Pray that God would enlarge our ability to worship. Ask him to give us the exuberance and lack of self-consciousness that these crowds of pilgrims had.

March 16

Mark 11: 12-25—the clearing of the temple

The next morning as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus felt hungry. ¹³ He noticed a fig tree a little way off that was in full leaf, so he went over to see if he could find any figs on it. But there were only leaves because it was too early in the season for fruit. ¹⁴ Then Jesus said to the tree, “May no one ever eat your fruit again!” And the disciples heard him say it. ¹⁵ When they arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants and their customers. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and he stopped everyone from bringing in merchandise. ¹⁷ He taught them, “The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be called a place of prayer for all nations,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves.” ¹⁸ When the leading priests and teachers of religious law heard what Jesus had done, they began planning how to kill him. But they were afraid of him because the people were so enthusiastic about Jesus’ teaching. ¹⁹ That evening Jesus and the disciples left the city. ²⁰ The next morning as they passed by the fig tree he had cursed, the disciples noticed it was withered from the roots. ²¹ Peter remembered what Jesus had said to the tree on the previous day and exclaimed, “Look, Teacher! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” ²² Then Jesus said to the disciples, “Have faith in God. ²³ I assure you that you can say to this mountain, ‘May God lift you up and throw you into the sea,’ and your command will be obeyed. All that’s required is that you really believe and do not doubt in your heart. ²⁴ Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it. ²⁵ But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘May no one ever eat your fruit again’—It seems a bit unfair and impetuous of Jesus to curse a fig tree simply because he was hungry and disappointed—especially since it wasn’t even fig season. It’s important to notice that the story of the fig tree brackets the story of the temple. Jesus is using the fig tree as a symbol of the temple. Jesus goes to the fig tree expecting figs, and all he finds are leaves. He goes to the temple expecting to find prayer, and he finds plenty of activity but no prayer. Just like a fig tree without figs is of no use to Jesus, a temple without prayer is of no use to him. The fig tree is a sign to the people who run the temple: they can expect the same thing to happen to the temple as happened to the tree.
- ‘you have made it into a den of thieves’—the quote about the house of prayer comes from the prophet Isaiah 56:7. The quote about the den of thieves comes from Jeremiah 7: 11. It’s not just that Jesus finds no prayer at the temple, it has been replaced with robbery. What exactly was going on? When people came to the temple, they were expected to offer unblemished animals for sacrifice. Some people traveled to Jerusalem from great distances, and found it difficult to bring animals all the way from home. For their convenience, the temple began to offer animals for purchase on the spot. However, over time—rather like hot dogs and beer at the ballpark—they began to severely over-charge. Furthermore—also like at the ballpark—they went from offering these official temple sacrifices for whomever wanted them to requiring that people buy the temple sacrifices. So, the temple officials were making a tidy profit on this business, but they were robbing the worshippers of their money and God of some of his offering. They were also robbing non-Jews of a place to pray. Jesus says that

the temple is supposed to be a place of prayer for all nations; but the officials have set up all of these tables in the court of the Gentiles, the place set aside for non-Jews to worship.

- 'you can say to this mountain'—'This mountain' would be Mount Zion, the site of the temple. Jesus is making another reference to the fact that he has little use for this prayerless temple.
- 'first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too'—Jesus offers them the lavish promise that, with faith, they can ask for anything they need. Then, he suggests what their first priority should be with this great gift—the most important thing they can ask for in faith is forgiveness. Take notice of the fact that the forgiveness has a condition: the Father will forgive us if we are forgiving others. We have the choice: we can live in an economy of justice or an economy of forgiveness. If we insist on justice for those who have wronged us, we will also receive justice. If we offer forgiveness, we will also receive forgiveness.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus says the greatest thing we can ask for is forgiveness. Spend a few minutes offering forgiveness to people you have something against, and receive the Father's forgiveness. If you ask in faith, God will give it to you.
- *For your six:* Jesus removed all of the merchants that were in the way of the Gentiles worshipping. Are there things that are crowding out your six, giving them no space to pray or worship? Especially think about religious barriers. Ask Jesus to remove them. Also take any steps you can to remove those barriers.
- *For our church:* Ask Jesus to make us a house of prayer for all nations. Ask him to remove anything that gets in the way of people being able to seek him, and ask him to draw all kinds of people from everywhere into our midst.