

**A Church Irrevocably Bound Together by Love and Grace**  
**based on Mark 4:21-34, David Jahnke, 4/19/15**

So I am doing this sermon series on the gospel of Mark. And on Easter Sunday, I spoke about the angel sending the disciples back to Galilee to meet the risen Jesus. Mark is sending us back to the beginning of his gospel to see and understand Jesus anew in light of the resurrection. So we are going to go back and everything will be clear.

But when I get back to where we left off in chapter four, Jesus is teaching mysterious parables. And the disciples seem frustrated so they ask Jesus to explain the parables which I can relate to.

We all want things to be crystal clear; black and white; no doubt about what must be done and when. As a friend said recently about his son's understanding of the Bible, "If the Bible says it, we must do it." Give it to us straight Jesus!

So Jesus gathers them together. But his explanation to modern ears is even more confounding than the parables themselves! He uses parables because, and quoting now,

"The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables **12** so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" "

So the "clarity" that Jesus provides directly contradicts the very core of his identity and mission as we have come to understand it; that is that Jesus came to reveal how loving and forgiving God is so that people would perceive and hear and turn back to God and receive forgiveness.

I think Jesus wants to humble us when we want super-clarity and perfectly prescriptive guidelines in all things for all times. I do not think we could handle perfect clarity about the ways of God. We would be overwhelmed by what God asks and how far we are from that.

I want to provide another example from our small groups this week of how the Bible can sometimes confound, at least initially, rather than clarify. In Romans chapter 8, Paul talks about how God has subjected creation to futility— God has done so, not Adam or sin-- in order that creation groan and long for God and find salvation in Him. And then at the end of chapter 11, Paul reinforces this in saying that God has imprisoned all in disobedience in order that he might have mercy upon all!

This is Paul's answer to the question of his Jewish brothers and sisters who are not believing his gospel. The Romans wondered, "If Jesus is the Messiah, the King of the Jews, why in the world would so many of the Jews would reject his gospel? What is going on Paul?"

Paul neither condemns his fellow Jews nor does he think it is o.k. that they have rejected Jesus. He looks at this, in terms of the absolute sovereignty of God and his mercy which alone saves . He looks at the historical circumstances going on around him and how the rejection of the gospel by most Jews (which Paul laments greatly) has led to the reception of the gospel by lawless Gentiles who have thus been grafted onto the Tree of Life. And this inclusion of the Gentiles would, in the fullness of time, eventually lead non-believing Jews to turn and receive the mercy prepared for them since the beginning of time by the Lamb of God.

Paul was scandalous from every angle. He was scandalous to believing and non-believing Jews for saying that Gentiles did not have to obey circumcision and dietary restrictions-- two critical aspects of God's Law. He was scandalous to Gentiles in insisting on God's irrevocable promises to the Jews.

I bring all of this up because so much of what is happening in our denomination and in our world regarding marriage and sexuality is scandalous to traditional Christians, including many of you I am sure. No matter what our personal position is on this matter-- and there will be diversity when it comes to such radical shift in perceptions of homosexuality-- we ought to remember that God is sovereign and is mysteriously grafting all kinds of people into His tree of Life and Love. And we should see this as an opportunity to go about God's salvation of those longing for love and community. Will we trust in the mysterious sovereignty of God blossoming around us, look at what is happening, some of it scandalous, and find a way to be a part of His gracious, loving and always welcoming Spirit—to the poor, the sick, the lonely and the outcast?

And do not think that I am up here with all of the answers insisting that you believe everything that I believe in this regard. We are all kind of muddling through a lot of this. My point is we need to hold each other gracefully through it all and reach out in love to draw people to God.

With these very difficult passages, the Spirit of God is telling us that will not receive perfect clarity until we are clothed with eternity. Regarding marriage, only then will we know whether God was leading homosexuals to lifelong monogamous commitments or not. Only then will we know whether Jesus insists on no divorce ever as in the gospel of Mark, whether he allows divorce in the case of adultery as in Matthew, or whether he allows it more broadly as most churches do today.

Only when the ambiguities of this very broken world and the limits of our finitude and sin are completely overcome will we finally and fully understand. In the meantime, Jesus insists that we live peacefully with and love each other through the tension and mystery and uncertainty and pain.

I watched a part of a documentary this week about a manager of various entertainers whose first client was Alice Cooper. These guys were wild and occasionally wicked and often quite ridiculous. One was a secular Jew and the other eventually became a born-again Christian. And they made next to nothing for quite some time at the beginning.

But these guys promised that they would stick together through thick and thin until they made their first million. I don't know how many millions down the road we are now but they are still together, the best of friends, and completely committed to each other and their families. Not having money would not break them apart nor would having a ton of it.

This speaks to the nature and purpose of the church. Life is so muddled and sometimes things are tough and sometimes they are great. And we all need people who will stick with us through thick and thin. We must embody this to the world because God sticks with us through thick and thin!

I was cruel enough to make our small groups talk about these passages this last week. And you should have seen all of the head-shaking and the astonished and puzzled looks on most everyone's faces. We said some things that probably helped some of us. And other things that made little sense at all. But we also laughed like children and showed care and respect to each other; and we affirmed one another and prayed together. And in the muddling and acceptance and laughter and mutual care, the light of God was shining bright upon us. Kingdom seeds that had been planted through our getting to know each other over the last year or two have mysteriously blossomed and are bearing fruit.

There was no great theological epiphany that I can relay but there was something much more important— there was Love and there was trust in God to sort it all out and make all things right in the end.

That is what Jesus was about as the disciples gathered around him. Did he give them perfect clarity? No. Did they always understand what he had to say? No. Did they always agree with him? No. Did he stick with them and give them the strength to carry on through thick and thin? Yes! May we do the same as we wrestle with and rejoice in God's Word and Spirit, alive and well whenever 2 or 3 are gathered in Christ's name...

