

The Urgent Call of Christ's Love based on Mark 1:9-14, David Jahnke, 1/11/15

Today I am starting a series on the gospel of Mark. It is the earliest the gospel and one of two primary sources for the gospels of Matthew and Luke. They combine Mark's gospel with oral tradition and the inspiration of the Spirit to give us more details and teachings.

Mark, however, moves at a rapid-fire pace. One of Mark's favorite words is Euthus— 'immediately', 'suddenly' 'at once.' In the first chapter of mark, he uses this word around 10 times... 'As soon as' Jesus came out of the water... 'At once' the Spirit sent him into the wilderness...; Andrew and Peter 'immediately' dropped their nets.

There is an urgency in this gospel that speaks to us. God is doing new things all around us all the time... And we don't want miss out on this. As soon as we rise out of bed, the Spirit descends and wants to shine light upon us. We have a bath and some bread and the Spirit at once sends us out into a wild world! We are hard at work and Jesus interrupts us and we immediately drop what we are doing and follow him. Ideally anyway...

When we suddenly think of our friend whose mom is in the hospital, will we immediately drop what we are doing and call? When we see the Bible on the coffee table and have a few minutes, will we go to it right away to receive a word? When called upon to serve our spouse or children or church, will we make that the urgent thing God is calling us to if nothing else is pressing upon us? These can be perceived as old burdens or as new opportunities, as can daily life in general.

I used to always love the expression, "same-old, same-old." "What's up?" "Not much... same-old same-old." I don't say that anymore. Things are not the same and things are not old. There is something new in every book, every movie, every song, every encounter with others, every prayer time. There is a wonderful urgency in life.

And that does not mean I am rushed. I am less rushed than ever. I used to get mad at hitting red lights. And when my Hispanic friend Adan would putter around in his truck in Austin, it would drive me crazy. I'd be like, "Dude, the speed limit's 30. And he'd be like, "What's your hurry bro?" And now I am the one idling down the road at 4 mph to the red light a block ahead, driving the people behind me crazy.

We, as Christians, should know that we have all the time in the world... literally. And at the same time, we can make every minute of the day a part of God's eternity. Life in the Spirit brings an immediacy— an unmediated experience— to the present. The past and the future no longer negatively mediate it. Past trials, traumas and sins that want to haunt the present are washed away and healed. Anxiety, fear, worry, and insecurity about the future is driven away as well. The Spirit brings eternity into the

present and this both slows everything down to be fully appreciated and urges us on to the next wonderful thing.

So after I wrote this first half of my sermon, things exploded in Paris. What urgent news might a 2000 year old gospel have for a world so divided and violent?

Mark knew a terribly divided and broken world as well. His nation was occupied by a foreign power which terrorized Jerusalem with regular crucifixions on the Hill of Skulls. This only further radicalized the zealots who thought violent action would stir rebellion against the foreigners and their own corrupt leaders. But all it did was lead to more violence and death and crucifixions.

Into this world came a man whose message was different; not just different from the zealots' call to arms; different from the Sadducees'—the aristocrats' call to appeasement and order; different from the Pharisees' call to strict obedience to the Law and the harsh judgment of the sinful who were responsible for this mess; different from the Essenes who were convinced they were the only true people of God and escaped to the country to wait on God to act.

Jesus' message was not about condemning, excluding, fighting or fleeing from the oppressor, the foreigner or the sinner. It was about engaging and converting them peacefully by the power of Love.

A theophany of Love is where Mark's gospel begins. That's your new word for the day—theophany means an appearance by God. Jesus is in the Jordan and a cloud comes over. The clouds parted and Jesus hears, "You are my beloved son. With you I am well-pleased."

"You are my beloved child" applies to every person on earth. Just as every child born in Israel was a child of God through the first covenant, the second covenant teaches us that we are all God's children.

The degree to which we please God varies. Our faith and faithfulness wax and wane. Only Jesus responded to God's love with a perfect love of others. That sort of love is our calling card. The more that we bear the truth that others are loved by God, the more pleasing we are to Him.

This is where Jesus distinguished himself from his teacher John. Instead of fire and judgment, Jesus had good news for the lost of his day. He broke bread with them and laughed with and loved and healed and forgave them and thus made clear to them that they were beloved children of God.

I have been reading a book called, Allah, A Christian Response by the Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. He argues quite boldly that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. I am not sure I am convinced. But Muslims generally believe it, as the Koran favorably characterizes Jews and Christians “people of the book.” This is a great opening. And the place for further dialog is whether God loves all or only the righteous and the believer.

Volf gave an illustration about an exchange he had with his 4 year old son about a Greek play he had just watched. One of the main characters makes the mistake of turning himself into a donkey.

My son was quiet for a while, and then he asked me a question I had not expected. “Daddy, would you love me if I became a donkey?” I don’t care much for donkeys, so I responded, very philosophically and very foolishly, “Well, if you turned into a donkey, you would no longer be Nathanael, and then I would not love you, but the donkey. In fact, if I loved that donkey, I would not . . .” In the rearview mirror, I saw horror on the face of my son. He did not fully understand my reasoning, but he got the drift. It never occurred to him that, if transformed, he would, at the core, not remain himself.

Changing radically while remaining yourself is what transformation is all about! He sensed that, and it was only my dislike of donkeys and a temporary shutdown of my emotional intelligence that made me forget it for a while. After the horror had passed, the tears came streaming down. He was inconsolable until I stopped the car and took him into my arms. He could not bear the thought that his father might stop loving him under any circumstances—whatever happened to him and whoever he became. Love is love, and it never changes—this he felt in the core of his being. He did not have the words to describe the character of true love. His tears were eloquent enough. My son was yearning to find in my love a reflection of divine love, unchanging no matter what changes we undergo, completely unearned but freely given. [Volf, Allah, A Christian Response, location 2634, Kindle]

So our response to God’s perfect love varies tremendously. Some of us are growing in our love for our neighbor—with our neighbor being anyone who crosses our path; and others of us do a pretty good job of making donkeys of ourselves. But God’s love of all never changes. That is the vital message that we must bear in Word and deed.

When I was agnostic in college, I was the personification of a donkey. I remember talking to a girl at a party about how heaven would bore me; that anyplace or thing, given an eternity to consider or experience, would eventually become like twiddling your thumbs on a cloud.

Now I felt this way because I was resisting and rejecting the call of heaven. At just 20 years old, everything was vain and empty already. I was not actually dreading the clouds of heaven but rather a meaningless life. I was longing for the clouds to part and for the sky to break open and for my soul to be filled.

I had to wait seven years for that. And when the clouds parted, everything became new, immediately. Again that word... But even in the meantime, God was watching over me every step of the way. My mom pointed this out every time I got into trouble at parties, while none of my friends did. She said God was trying to tell me something.

God's providence came through my sister and some new friends as well. I told my sister how interesting it was that of all the agnostic and atheist ex-pat colleagues and acquaintances I had over four years in Korea, the ones I ended up getting close to were Christians, even though I was not. She smiled and said she was not surprised. She had been praying that I meet good Christian friends for years.

None of these good people tried to explicitly convert me. But they also did not shy away from matters of faith or their identification as Christians. They just simply accepted and loved me and every once in a while, mentioned God or church. They planted and watered seeds, often unknowingly I am sure, that helped me eventually realize the love of God.

This is what we are called to do in an often godless culture. We accept people as God does, without condition. We give special consideration to befriending the immigrant, the young, the lonely and the disenfranchised who are prone to radicalization, just as we were and perhaps still are. The question is radical about what?... about hate or love? War or peace? Condemnation or grace? Revenge or forgiveness? Gaining or giving? There is only one God over all. We all see and hear him in the clouds, in the flight of birds, in a rolling river. May our lives point others to this God of constant Grace watching over with power, descending with peace and speaking Love to all...

