

Bible Study on Sexism
Session Two
Suffering and Power in Mark 8:34

Opening

You may want to begin with a prayer and/or a hymn or song. Suggestions follow.

O, God!
Where are you?
Our suffering often takes over us.
We see no way out.
We squirm with the pains of sorrows and of the flesh.
O, God!
Where are you?
Take our suffering away.
In Jesus' way we pray,
Amen.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship Hymn #347, "Go to Dark Gethsemane," vv. 1-2, 4

Introduction

The Gospel of Mark is most likely the earliest written of the four canonical gospels and evokes images of an often terse but healing Jesus. Within this contrast of terseness and compassion in Mark, Jesus both uses power and invites others into the power of the kingdom of God. This session on a Markan understanding of suffering and power is a critical introduction to session three, which looks at power and privilege in Mark.

The Reading

Read Mark 8:34, aloud or silently (or both).
Write down or share with others in your group anything that strikes you.

Commentary

Mark 8:34 is a pivotal passage in discerning the way Jesus understands and uses power in this gospel: "[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'" (NRSV).¹ Unfortunately, our modern sense of individualism has prevented many interpreters from grasping the meaning of the passage for Mark's audience. Common understanding of this passage is that following Jesus means bearing a great deal of human suffering that comes one's way. Such an interpretation all but legitimizes powerlessness in some contemporary contexts, such as for women who suffer from the effects of sexism, particularly violence. Indeed, Mark 8:34 is often cited as a key text that supports the oppression of women in many guises. As we shall see, this is not the best interpretation of the passage.

¹ Although the translators of the NRSV Bible have referred to plural followers, in the earliest Greek sources, Jesus speaks in the masculine singular. One of the strengths of the NRSV is its gender inclusive interpretation.

Suffering and Power

Instead, feminist work on this pivotal passage lifts up two important elements for contemporary readers to grasp: how the writer of Mark understands *suffering* and *power*. First, Mark appears to distinguish between two kinds of suffering: ordinary human suffering and the suffering of persecution. Ordinary human suffering is the kind of suffering that in the ancient world was a given fact of existence. In other words, if you lived, you suffered from a variety of physical maledictions. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus healing others from these states of suffering. (See, for example, Mark 1:21-28; 1:29-34; and 1:40-45.)

Jesus also clearly gives the power to heal to others. That is, others have Jesus' power of the kingdom of God to use for the good of others—to heal others. (See, for example, Mark 6:7-13.) Mark's sense of time is that God's reign in Jesus overlaps the present day, and followers share in the power of the kingdom. However, using the power of God does not mean that Jesus' followers have the power of the kingdom of God at their disposal to use against others in force or domination. In sum, although ordinary human suffering was unavoidable in the ancient world, Jesus and his followers used the power of God to heal others from ordinary suffering. In contrast, the suffering that Jesus implies in Mark 8:34 to "take up [your] cross" does not refer to ordinary suffering. The cross within Mark's context means persecution. If you follow Jesus, you will not avoid being persecuted. You will suffer persecution by people who are opposed to God's way in the world. Avoiding this type of suffering is possible, unlike general human misery. All one must do to avoid this kind of suffering is to deny Jesus. Then you will not be persecuted.

The "Self"

With this understanding in mind, let us look again at the passage. Read Mark 8:34 once more. As many scholars have noted, there is a pattern to the verse:

Follow Jesus

 Reject "self"

 Take up cross

Follow Jesus

Having learned more about the way in which the writer of Mark appears to understand suffering, we also need to go back to the tricky problem of contemporary individualism and how that affects our reading of the Christian Bible. Our contemporary notions of a free individual—the self—were not operative in the ancient Near East. The basic unit of social systems in the post-Enlightenment Western world is the individual. This was not the case in Jesus' world. Rather, the basic unit of society was the kinship group, which was a paternally ordered hierarchy with the father or eldest brother at the top making the decisions for the clan.

Why does this matter for trying to understand suffering and power in Mark? Jesus calls followers to reject the "self." This may sound like a call to self-sacrifice to us, but rejecting the "self" in the Markan context would mean rejecting the basic social unit to which you belonged. Rejecting the "self" is not a call to radical self-sacrifice but a radical call to subvert basic social patterns by renouncing one's kinship group and joining *Jesus'* group.

What we see is Jesus' guidance towards a radical kinship group with him. If one rejected one's kinship group in the ancient world, one would be without the necessary economic and social support and structure necessary to live. People would be upset that someone had bucked the system, so to speak. People were not to go outside of the accepted social norms of society, the family kinship unit. We see that following Jesus can mean subverting accepted social patterns in order to be part of God's kingdom, where God's power is used to heal ordinary human suffering.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Decide if you would like to share your first reactions together, take time for reflection and writing first, or work with a combination of first reactions and writing. If working in a group, choose a style that allows time for all of the voices in your group. If working alone, you may want to write down your reflections for later reference.

What do you think of this re-reading of Mark 8:34? What thoughts do you have in relation to the commentary after your first reaction to the passage at the beginning of the session?

Mark's audience is urged to reject the hierarchical family kinship unit to live in kinship with Jesus. How would you describe an analogy to this verse in contemporary terms?

What social patterns do you as an individual reject in order to follow Jesus?

What social patterns do you think the church at large is compelled to reject in order to follow Jesus? What about your local congregation, community, or social group?

What persecution (and therefore suffering) is unavoidable for being in kinship with Jesus and Jesus' followers?

The cross in Mark's context would be the instrument of persecution that followers of Jesus would not easily avoid. What might "your cross" look like from this perspective? Try to identify the instruments of persecution and execution today.

What power is available to you in your life, either individually or as part of a group? Do you use this power? How do you use this power?

Is it helpful to think about the power of the kingdom of God as a power for the healing of others? How does this relate to your baptism? What suffering are you able to help others to alleviate?

In the re-reading of Mark explored in this study, Jesus gives the power to heal to others. What is your role in alleviating the suffering that results from sexism? Some prominent examples of the effects of sexism include (but are not limited to): consumeristic views of women and girls in the media, rape, clergy sexual abuse, human trafficking in women and girls for the sex industry, pornography, video games and Web logs (blogs) that target violence on women, domestic violence. (Men and boys are also raped, trafficked, used in pornography, and beaten and abused in their own homes and by clergy. However, the preponderance of these images and crimes are about and against women and girls.)

Closing

You may want to end with a prayer and/or a hymn or song. Suggestions follow.

O Jesus who suffered,
Heal us.
Live in us
so that we may live to take away the suffering of others.
Be with us in our time of need
When we suffer for the sake of your way in the world.
Amen.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship Hymn #351, "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," v. 1

Selected Bibliography and Further Reading

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Dewey, Joanna. "‘Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take Up their Cross’: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8.34 in Mark’s Social and Narrative World," in Amy-Jill Levine, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Mark*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004, 23-36.

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Tolbert, Mary Ann. "Mark" in Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 350-362.

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