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R ILLUSTRATION: Francesco de Mura (1696 . Christ Healing a Blind Man. Basildon Park, Berkshire, J. Photo Credit: John Hammond. National Trust Photo /Art Resource, NY.

In This Issue

Volume 70 Number 2
April 2016

The Gospel of Mark

141 Editorial: Introducing this Issue and the Interpretation of Mark's Gospel
John T. Carroll

145 The "Good News" of God's Coming Reign: Occupation at the Crossroads
Suzanne Watts Henderson

This essay suggests that Mark's "good news" tells the story of Jesus as the launching ground for the insurgency of God's coming kingdom: a paradoxical and subversive notion of power predicated on solidarity with those under the sway of evil. In the end, Mark's "good news" about God's coming kingdom registers a first-century call that retains relevance today—a robust, counter-cultural call to trust that the end of evil's occupation is at hand.

159 Mark and Disability
Jaime Clark-Soles

This essay explores the Gospel of Mark through the lens of disability, with attention to understandings of disability in the ancient world, the language of affliction, questions of faith and sin, forms of healing, and the agency of the impaired person. The essay examines the "powers" in the Gospel of Mark and demonstrates how Jesus's action in casting out demons and unclean spirits counters the empire's claim to be the agent of healing and salvation but also disrupts the status quo at a cosmic level.

172 The Two Banquets: Mark's Vision of Anti-Imperial Economics
Raj Nadella

This article examines Mark's depiction of the empire, specifically the intrinsic and symbiotic link between the empire and economics within first-century Palestine. It highlights Mark's critique of Rome's economic structures, the worldview underlying those structures, and the mechanisms the empire employs to maintain them. The article suggests that the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus challenges existing structures and models alternative paradigms of economic transactions.

184 Jesus as Teacher: Boundary Breaking in Mark's Gospel and Today's Church
Brian K. Blount

Mark 4:35–41 provides an interpretive lens for Jesus as Teacher in the earliest Gospel. It is a lens of inclusive politics. This essay emphasizes that Jesus teaches the Reign of God by the way in which he lives his ministry. That teaching focuses on breaking down the boundaries that separate humans from one another.

Between Text and Sermon

194 Mark 10:1–52
David Schnasa Jacobsen

197 Mark 12:28–34
Cynthia A. Jarvis

200 Mark 15:25–41
Matthew A. Rich

Major Reviews

203 *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement* by Michael J. Gorman
Frank J. Matera

206 *God the Revealed: Christology* by Michael Welker, translated by Douglas W. Stott
Najib George Awad

208 *Reading the Parables* by Richard Lischer
Barbara E. Reid, O.P.

211 *By the River Chebar: Historical, Literary, and Theological Studies in the Book of Ezekiel* by Daniel I. Block and *Beyond the River Chebar: Studies in Kingship and Eschatology in the Book of Ezekiel* by Daniel I. Block
Steven S. Tuell

214 **Short Reviews**

244 **Book Notes**

Article

Mark and Disability

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Jaime Clark-Soles
Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX

Abstract
This essay explores the Gospel of Mark through the lens of disability, with attention to understandings of disability in the ancient world, the language of affliction, questions of faith and sin, forms of healing, and the agency of the impaired person. The essay examines the "powers" in the Gospel of Mark as a form of empire and demonstrates how Jesus's action in casting out demons and unclean spirits is a disruption of the status quo at a cosmic level.

Keywords
Faith; Healing; Health; Disability; Impairment; Blind; Deaf; Gospel of Mark; Human body; Imperialism; Rome; Sin; Touch

Introduction

I regularly teach a class at Perkins School of Theology called "Evil, Suffering, and Death in the New Testament" (sometimes affectionately called "the Evil class," for short). Though I have printed my officially approved course goals in the syllabus, on the first day of class I say to my students, "My real goal is for us to stop saying stupid stuff about evil, suffering, and death." Part of that goal entails thinking more deeply about issues such as the Bible and disability.

The Americans with Disabilities Act took effect in 1990 as an attempt to ensure rights for persons with disabilities. Twenty percent of Americans are disabled, and the number is growing. If we live long enough, we all are likely to become a part of this group as disease, injury, trauma, or advancing age take away full health, mobility, sight and/or hearing. Thus, we are all "temporarily able-bodied."

In the summer of 2014, I participated in the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability.[1] In addition to delivering a plenary lecture on Disability in the Johannine Literature, I co-taught a four-day seminar with Jeremy Schipper on "Scriptural Representations of Disability." One stated theme for the week was "Disability as Question and Questioner." Indeed.

1 http://bethesdainstitute.org/Summer-Institute-on-Theology-and-Disability-History

Corresponding author:
Jaime Clark-Soles, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, 5915 Bishop Blvd, Dallas, TX 75208, United States.
Email: jaimecs@smu.edu

As part of the good news that the kingdom of God has come near in Jesus, the Gospels narrate numerous stories of miraculous cures. While healing is always a worthy goal of Christian practice to be celebrated whenever and wherever it occurs, the cure stories are not necessarily unmitigated good news for those faithful people who live with various chronic disabilities. As Kerry Wynn notes: "The two most common assumptions in popular theology that marginalize people with disabilities are (1) disability is caused by sin, and (2) if one has enough faith, one will be healed."[2]

Disability studies is a relatively new discipline in the humanities (and even newer in biblical studies) that attends to the "economic, political, social, cultural, and religious aspects of the ways disability is defined, experienced, and managed by groups and individuals."[3] In disability studies it is customary to distinguish between *impairment* (a physiological, medical phenomenon) and *disability* (a social phenomenon). A society *disables* people who have *impairments* when it refuses to take steps to ensure that all members of society have equal access to the benefits of that society, including education, transportation, employment, architecture that can be navigated, and political power—all of which are entitlements that people with no impairments usually take for granted. There is some debate about designations, but for this essay I will distinguish between temporarily able-bodied persons (TABs) and persons with disabilities (PWDs).

There is another important distinction between "cure" and "healing," which are not synonyms. "Cure" refers to the elimination of impairment at the individual level. "Healing" refers to a person's experience of integration and reconciliation to self, God, and the community. "Healing" may or may not involve a "cure." Just as impairment is experienced on an individual basis, so is a "cure." Just as a "disability" is a communally imposed limitation, so also "healing" is a communally based liberation.

A third distinction concerns the way in which an impaired person views his or her own impairment. Not all impairments cause pain and suffering that require healing. Not all people with impairments consider their disabilities as tragic losses.

This essay explores the Gospel of Mark through the lens of disability, giving attention to such topics as impairment and disability in the ancient world, forms of healing (whether or not these involve a "cure"), and the agency of the impaired person. I begin by situating the reader in the method, defining terms, and making some general comments and observations about disability in Mark. I then use the method to explore a few specific passages.[4] If successful, the essay will signal issues, raise awareness, start or continue a conversation, and direct the reader to further resources. The Gospel of Mark is a narrative that intentionally aims, through story, to persuade the reader of its thesis statement: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and

2 Kerry H. Wynn, "Johannine Healings and Otherness of Disability," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34 (2007): 61–75 (61).

3 Jaime Clark-Soles, *Engaging the Word: The New Testament and the Christian Believer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 135.

4 To date there is no full-scale treatment of the Gospel of Mark from a disability perspective. I hope that lacuna is soon filled.

believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The rest of the Gospel unpacks the meaning of Jesus's inaugural declaration. What does it mean that the time has been fulfilled in Jesus's coming? What is the kingdom of God, and how do we know it when we see it? What is the good news, according to Mark? Is it good news for people with disabilities?

The Language of Affliction and Healing in Mark

The Gospel of Mark contains numerous references to cures and healing. There are stories of individual healings, summaries of numerous healings, and references to the physical senses (or lack thereof) as metaphor (e.g., 4:9). In Mark, there are many ways to be afflicted and a number of ways to be made well.

The Language of Affliction in Mark

The Gospel of Mark describes impairments or disabilities in terms of demon-possession or illness, or as named impairments. Some characters are disabled by what Mark identifies as "demons" or "unclean spirits," which was a common view of illness in the first century. The man in 1:21–28 has an unclean spirit, as does the man from Gerasa (5:1–20). The Syrophoenician woman's daughter has an unclean spirit (7:25), further named as a demon (v. 26). Mark 9:14–29 narrates the story of a boy with an unclean spirit (9:25), and Jesus himself is accused of having an unclean spirit (3:30) named Beelzebul (3:22), and of having "gone out of his mind" (3:21). In certain places we find narrative summaries in which Mark conveys that Jesus did many more miraculous deeds that are not individually narrated in the Gospel. For example: "Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!'" (3:11; see also 1:32–34).

Of course, as the Son of God, Jesus has authority over the unclean spirits. Mark 3:27 indicates that Jesus busied himself with tying up the strong man—Satan—and plundering his house. In the Markan summary at 1:39, we see him do two things as he goes throughout Galilee: he proclaims the message and casts out demons. He commands his disciples to do the same (3:15). He gives them this power (6:7) and they succeed (6:13), but they also fail (9:14–29). Moreover, we learn that the ability to cast out demons is not limited to Jesus or his followers (9:38).

Other people in the Gospel are described as "being ill" (*kakōs echontas* in 1:32, 34 and 6:53–56). Jesus declares that he comes for the sick, not those who do not need a physician (2:17). Jesus is an effective physician, unlike the physicians who had failed to cure the woman with the flow of blood (5:26). Sometimes Mark identifies people by their name and their impairment. Which Simon? Simon the leper (14:3). Which Bartimaeus? Blind Bartimaeus (10:46). More often, a person is nameless and is identified entirely with the disability: the leper, the blind man, the paralytic, the woman with the flow of blood. This form of identification with the person's impairment poses a problem.

Modern disability activists have taught us to see persons with disabilities as persons first. A disability is only one aspect of a person and not the main one. Thus, it is important to use "person-first" language when referring to anyone with a disability. A feature of the new Common English Bible

(CEB) translation that I greatly appreciate is its commitment to person-first language. For instance, where the NRSV has "the leper," the CEB has "the man with the skin disease" (1:40). Where the NRSV has "a deaf man," the CEB has "a man who was deaf" (7:32). In addition to people who are blind (*typhlos*, 8:22–23; 10:46, 49, 51) or who have leprosy (*lepra*, 1:42), there are a man with a withered hand (*exērammenēn tēn cheira*, 3:1); a little girl "at the point of death" (*eschatōs*, 5:23); a woman with a flow of blood (*en rhysei haimatos*, 5:25); people who are hearing-impaired (*kōphos*, 7:32, 37), have a speech impediment (*mogilalos*, 7:32), or cannot speak at all (*alalos*, 9:17); a man who is "crippled" (*kyllos*, 9:43); and there is also reference to being lame (*chōlos*, 9:45).

The Language of Healing in Mark

If the language of affliction is varied in Mark, the language of healing is overwhelming and active. Jesus rebukes spirits (*epitimaō*, 1:25). Both Jesus and the disciples "cast out" demons (*exercho-mai*, 1:25–26; *ekballō*, 1:34) and cure (*therapeuō*, 1:34; 3:10; 6:5, 13). Jesus "lifts up" or "raises" (*egeirō*) a woman and a little girl and causes them to stand (1:31; 5:41–42). He makes people clean (*kathairō*, 1:41), forgives sins (*aphiēmi hamartias*, 2:10), makes well (*sōzō*, 5:34; 6:56; cf. 5:23, 28), and cures (*iaomai*, 5:29). People get up and walk, gain or regain their sight, and their problems and illnesses leave them. Ears are opened, tongues released, those who are deaf hear, and those who could not speak now speak. Note that much of this healing involves touch (3:10; 5:27–28; 6:56; 7:33; 8:22, 25; 10:13).

Sin and Disability in Mark

A connection between sin and disability is almost non-existent in Mark; would that this were so in the contemporary experience of persons with disabilities who have to defend themselves against assumptions that an impairment is their "fault" and might to some extent be "deserved." Only the story of the man with paralysis pairs sin and disability in the Gospel of Mark (2:5).

We know that some ancients believed that disability was caused by sin. As interpreters, we can handle this fact in different ways. We can, on the one hand, uncritically accept that belief and assume no difference between the first century and the twenty-first century. Or we can reject the idea completely and assume no similarity between the first century and the twenty-first century. I choose neither option. The subject deserves more nuance than either of those extremes affords.

The connection between sin and disability is not an "either/or" but a "both/and." Certainly, in the Gospel of John, Jesus's disciples assume sinfulness in the case of a man born blind: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus, though, roundly rejects their assumption: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (9:3). Therefore, we should be wary of connecting sin with disabling conditions.

On the other hand, I think part of the genius of Scripture is to testify to the complex, nuanced reality of our lives: sometimes we do experience disabling conditions because of our sin or that of others. Because life itself is so complicated, the text warns us that there is there is no "one size fits

all" explanation for the reality of our different lives. Discerning the truth *always* requires humility and discernment. Finding a way to move forward into God's future story for us requires an accurate assessment of our current situation. The disciples in John 9 had it wrong, so they were unable to offer any healing to the blind man; rather, they added to his suffering with their devastatingly wrong theology.

With regard to Mark 2:1–12, I would affirm both of these things: (1) Mark uses the story to show Jesus's authority to forgive sin; and (2) persons with disabilities (PWDs) are not more or less sinful than anyone else. Temporarily able-bodied persons (TABs) make two mistakes with reference to sinfulness. First, many blame victims for their disability and try causally to connect sin and disability. Second, well-meaning TABs sometimes go to the opposite extreme and treat PWDs as sinless innocents in need of charity and special treatment. In so doing, however, they infantilize PWDs and treat them as "others." Persons with disabilities are no different from anyone else—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

In the following analysis of two related stories about Jesus healing blindness, I will examine the ways in which our assumptions about "disability" pose questions about our society's role in healing.

Disability as Question and Questioner: Two Stories of Healing Persons with Blindness

Markan rhetorical technique often works in a two-stage manner by using a framing device called an *inclusio*. The frame helps readers interpret the meaning of the material inside it. The Gospel of Mark contains two healing stories about people with blindness (8:22–26 and 10:46–52). The two healing stories about blindness form an *inclusio*. We are supposed to interpret what lies in between in light of the frame.

What lies between the two stories? All three of Jesus's Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34; cf. 9:9–13) and the disciples' reactions to these predictions. After the first prediction, Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus declares: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). After the second prediction, the disciples show their incomprehension by immediately debating which among them is the greatest (9:33–34). After the third, James and John immediately request to sit at his right and left (10:35–37). After these predictions and misunderstandings, Jesus performs his last miracle by healing Bartimaeus of his blindness (10:46–52). A contrast is being made, therefore: the disciples have physical sight, but no insight. Those who are presented as blind gain sight. All of the material is used, of course, for the sake of the reader so that he or she may come to understand who Jesus is and what faithful discipleship entails.

Sight and Insight in Mark 8:22–26

The first healing story is set in the context of the disciples' failure to understand Jesus's mission, and this setting tends to influence interpretation of the healing. In 8:17–21, just prior to Jesus's healing the first blind man, Jesus questions the disciples' (mis)understanding of his miraculous deed of feeding

the four thousand. He asks them a series of questions, including these: "Do you still not perceive or understand? . . . Do you have eyes, but fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" The passage ends with these words: "Do you not yet understand?" (v. 21). Mark is famous for portraying the disciples as lacking in a number of ways. Their failure is part of Mark's larger ironic portrayal of "insiders" vs. "outsiders." Those who should be "in the know" (the Twelve, the religious leaders) fail to understand Jesus and his mission, while those outside Jesus's circle understand who he is (the woman with the flow of blood, Gentiles, demons). The man who is blind is no exception to this pattern.

As soon as Jesus chastises his disciples for having no insight or understanding, Mark tells this story about a person who is physically blind but after encounter with Jesus comes to see "everything clearly" (8:22–26 [v. 25]). The emphasis on "sight" is heightened by Mark's use of several different verbs for "seeing" (*blepō*, *diablepō*, *anablepō*, *emblepō*) in a very brief passage.

The nameless person in the story is referred to only by the adjective "blind." Notice that he does not come by his own agency; rather, "they" (the disciples? the townspeople?) bring the man to Jesus, and they beg him to touch the man. Jesus's touch and touching Jesus or his clothing is a tool of healing throughout the miracle stories (1:41; 3:10; 5:27–28, 30–31; 6:56; 7:33; 8:22; 10:13). Jesus takes the man away from the village, puts saliva on his eyes, and lays his hands on him (cf. John 9:6). This technique, though foreign to our own experience, was a common practice of first-century wonder-workers.[5] Jesus asks the man if he can see anything, and the man "regain[s] his sight" (*anablepō*, lit. "look upward") in 8:23–24. The fact that the man says that the people look like trees walking about (v. 24) raises the question as to whether he was born blind or lost his sight at some point. From a disability perspective, those are two different experiences. For persons born blind, blindness is normal. Those who lose their sight may experience blindness as tragic.

Jesus's initial healing action is not fully efficacious, so he lays his hands on the man's eyes a second time; only then does the man see clearly and fully (two different verbs are used here: *diablepō*, "see clearly"; and *emblepō*, "to look at something directly and therefore intently" [BDAG]). The two-stage healing applies metaphorically to Peter in particular: with partial sight he knows enough to call Jesus the Messiah, but he also has continuing partial blindness, evident in his desire to have Jesus abandon the sacrificial aspect of his mission (8:32–33). The man's two-stage healing represents the two-stage healing of the disciples in general: they only partially understand Jesus's identity (as a powerful wonder-worker), but cannot fully understand who Jesus is until they "see" the whole story unfold on the cross. Even more broadly, the healing story also represents two stages of Christian belief and practice (this is where we, the readers, come in), because stage one is

5 According to Suetonius, numerous healings were ascribed to the emperor Vespasian (see *Twelve Caesars*, Vesp. 7:2–3). Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* recounts miracles done by Apollonius. Inscriptional and literary evidence shows that Asclepius was credited with healing abilities as well. For more information, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 391–92. Mark never indicates that Jesus was *not* a wonder-worker; rather, he was a master at it. What makes Jesus different from the other wonder-workers is that despite his power and ability and potential for unlimited self-aggrandizement, he instead chooses the way of the cross.

the Gospel and stage two is the church—what we do once we know the full story of who Jesus is from our post-Easter vantage point.

Most interpreters understand this healing story metaphorically, as does Adela Yarbro Collins:

> The blind man himself, being an individual in need of physical healing, also represents the "blind" disciples. . . . The evidence of the text . . . supports a symbolic reading. The allusion to Jeremiah in v. 18 implies that the disciples are "blind." The section in which Jesus gives the disciples extensive private instruction (8:27–10:45) is framed by two stories about healing the blind. . . . A symbolic reading is supported also by the use of blindness as a metaphor in Greek and biblical traditions. In Greek tragedy, among the pre-Socratics, and in Plato's works, blindness is a metaphor for ignorance. In the Bible, Isa 6:9-10 and Jer 5:21 use the metaphor of blindness for the impenitence and obstinacy of the people. Mark cites both of these passages.[6]

This type of metaphorical interpretation raises a number of issues if we read from a disability perspective. First, why must we assume that every blind person is in need of physical healing? Not all blind people consider their condition abnormal or themselves as in need of healing. Tiffany and Ringe ask, "Why is such a premium placed on able-bodiedness? Why is the 'good news' not expressed as a world made accessible to and accepting of persons of all physical, mental, and psychological circumstances, rather than as persons changed to conform to the world's norms?"[7]

Second, what about personal agency? Is it not the blind person's decision whether or not to seek a cure? Not all impairments are painful or impossible to bear physically. Nancy Eiseland addresses this concern in her groundbreaking book *The Disabled God*.[8] Society expects those with impairments to do everything in their power to attempt to gain a "normate" body;[9] if they do not, even medical staff can be reluctant to help them because they are viewed as "non-compliant."

In the story Mark narrates in 8:22–26, everyone around the blind man assumed he should *want* to see; *they* beg Jesus to touch him (v. 22). Generally speaking, most temporarily able-bodied persons fear becoming disabled, so they warm to a story that concludes with a person receiving a body freed of an impairment. Notice that the man in the story does not act under his own agency. People take him to Jesus; Jesus takes him somewhere else; Jesus acts upon his body and tells him where

6 Collins, *Mark*, 393–95.

7 Fredrick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 183; as quoted by Colleen Grant, "Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives," in *Human Disability and the Service of God*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 72–87 (78).

8 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

9 This word was coined by Rosemarie Garland Thomson in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The neologism "designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (8).

to go or not to go. The man appears as reactive rather than proactive. Persons with disabilities often experience this violation of boundaries. People in wheelchairs experience being "moved out of the way" without anyone first asking their permission. In contrast, no one would put unwelcomed hands on the bodies of temporarily able-bodied adults to move them.

Third, the story points to the ambiguity of touch. If transgressing boundaries of touch can be an issue (as in moving a person in a wheelchair without his or her permission), so can lack of touch. Even though the Gospel story shows that Jesus's touch heals, sometimes temporarily able-bodied persons are overly reluctant to touch a person with a disability, because they are afraid the person is too frail. Also, at an irrational level, they might fear that the disability is somehow "contagious."

Fourth, as mentioned above, disability as a metaphor has numerous pitfalls, especially when the disability is a metaphor for a negative trait to be overcome. Such is the case when blindness is associated with ignorance. The negative association of ignorance is mapped onto the bodies of real blind people, and they are viewed as "less than."

Finally, the habit of identifying a character or a person with their disability leads to "erasure" of the person. In Mark 8:22–26 the unnamed man, who barely speaks, appears as a cipher; he is merely a tool to drive the plot forward and to demonstrate a larger point about insightful vs. ignorant discipleship. His presence is anemic; his body and person are merely "acted upon." This amounts to erasure. To "erase" the disability may be a move to "erase" the person.[10] The man matters only because he was both a blind person and became cured. He *is* his impairment, nothing more. Had he kept the impairment, he would not be useful to the story.

Sight and Insight in Mark 10:46–52

How does the healing of a blind man in Mark 8 compare to the one in ch. 10? First, the man in 10:46–52 has a name: Bartimaeus. He is further identified as a "blind beggar" sitting along the "way" (*hodos*, v. 46). Second, he himself *actively* calls out to Jesus by name and with the title "Son of David" (v. 47). He demands that Jesus have mercy upon him. Many people attempt to control him and rob him of agency by ordering him to silence. But far from capitulating, he instead boldly acts up and gets even louder as he repeats the title Son of David and the demand (v. 48). Jesus rewards his defiance by summoning him; far from being led, this man energetically throws off his cloak, "springs up," and comes of his own accord (v. 50). Unlike the earlier story, where Jesus assumes the man wants to be healed, here he asks Bartimaeus what he specifically wants (v. 51a). Now calling Jesus *Rabbouni* ("my rabbi," or "my teacher"), the man makes a direct request: to see (*anablepō*, v. 51b). Jesus declares that the man's faith has made him well. Immediately, the man receives exactly what he requested—to see (*anablepō*). But this story ends on a decidedly different note than the earlier one, in which Jesus sends the man home (8:26). Here we learn that the man "follows" (*akoloutheō*)

10 Amos Yong addresses this well in his book *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

Jesus on the way (*hodos*, v. 52). Both *akoloutheō* (follow) and *hodos* (way) are theologically loaded terms in Mark's Gospel. In 1:17–18, Jesus said: "'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him." The same occurs with Levi in 2:14. To *follow* in Mark means to be a disciple of Jesus: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and *follow me*" (8:34), a statement that comes after Jesus's rebuke of Peter (note also that in 14:54 Peter follows "at a distance"). So, like the disciples, Bartimaeus follows Jesus; his story highlights the failure of the disciples to understand the way of the cross, vividly on display just prior to the encounter with Bartimaeus (10:32–37).

The "way" (*hodos*) is also translated "road," "path," and "journey" in the NRSV. It first appears in Mark 1:2 in a quotation from Isa 40:3, about the forerunner who will "prepare the way." Numerous important questions related to discipleship and Christology occur while Jesus and his disciples are on "the way," including Jesus's question about who they say that Jesus is (8:27). At 10:32 they are on "the way" to Jerusalem, and "Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid." Jesus teaches "the way [*hodos*] of God in accordance with truth" (ironic affirmation by Jesus's adversaries in 12:14). So, it appears, Bartimaeus responds to the gift of restored sight by beginning (continuing?) a disciple's journey with Jesus, as he proceeds to Jerusalem and the cross—even as the (other) disciples struggle to accept this vocation.

Faith and Healing

Bartimaeus's faith, Jesus says, has "made him well" or "saved" him (*sesōken*, from the verb *sōzō*, 10:52). This raises questions about the relationship between faith and healing. Persons with disabilities are often told that if they "just have more faith," they will be cured. To say this adds further distress to a person already burdened and ignores the fact that most of the healing stories make no mention at all of faith.

When the stories do mention faith, Jesus's words about faithfulness and faithlessness tend to be directed not to the individual but to the community around him or her. Never in this Gospel is a person with a disability castigated for lack of faith. Jesus praises the woman with the flow of blood for her faith and her refusal to be pushed aside (5:34), as he does the man's friends in 2:4–5. Jesus accuses the father of the boy in 9:23–24, not the boy himself, of lacking faith. And the lecture about the power of faith is given not to persons with disabilities but to the temporarily able-bodied disciples: "Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you'" (11:22–23).

Only in the Markan stories of the woman with the flow of blood (5:25–34) and Bartimaeus (10:46–52) does someone's faith integrate them. Notice that their faith makes them well, rather than effecting their cure. Incidentally, they both receive a cure *in addition to* wellness. Jesus says to the woman: "Daughter, your faith has made you well [*sesōken*, from *sōzō*]; go in peace, and be healed [*hygiēs*] of your disease" (5:34). She thus proleptically represents the very act of discipleship Jesus teaches the disciples about in 11:22–23, mentioned in the discussion above. Mark tells

us: "She came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she kept on saying to herself, 'If I but touch his garments, I will be made well [*sōthēsomai*, also from *sōzō*]'" (5:27–28). And then: "Immediately her fountain of blood dried up and she knew in her body that she had been healed [*iatai*, from *iaomai*]) of the scourge" (5:29, my trans.; unfortunately, the NRSV eliminates the graphic description). The varied vocabulary of healing in this passage intimates that there is more to well-being than able bodies and physical cures. The persistent woman with the flow of blood experiences physical restoration, to be sure, but something more important, a sense of wholeness and integration with God, self, and community.

Noticing that most of the healing stories that connect faith and healing do so in a manner that is *communal* should prompt us to ask what our community is doing to bring healing to those around us. Is pushing the problem onto individuals and their presumed lack of faith a form of scapegoating that deflects attention from the ways in which the community magnifies the experience of disability and creates obstacles to full inclusion in all aspects of society? Is our own faith active enough to seek healing and use our voices and everything in our power to help persons with impairments achieve the life God has envisioned for them?

Also the man who seeks restored sight in Mark 10 emerges as a thoroughly positive character. Indeed, his understanding and faith make him a paradigm for the reader, as opposed to the disciples, who remain obtuse. Bartimaeus is a strong, robust character. One might argue that his primary contribution to the Gospel is less his being cured and more his active belief and discipleship, with the "cure" itself as secondary.

However, the story also raises some concerns. The man becomes a follower, and therefore a fisher of people. He has a missional vocation that is to be commended. What is missing from the story, though, is the idea that he could have been just as effective in Christian mission as a man with impaired sight. A sad truth about this Gospel is the thoroughgoing notion that people with physical impairments need to be ministered *to*. One never sees a disabled person following a call and a ministry while *still* being disabled.

What does this mean for people today who have impairment and, as a result, have an incredibly difficult time finding a church that will utilize their ministry skills as lay leaders or ordained ministers? What message is the church sending to the larger society when it finds that hiring a pastor with a disability is "too much trouble"? I have met persons with disabilities whose impairment has opened avenues of ministry for them that temporarily able-bodied persons might not have the credibility or life-experience to speak to. For instance, Rev. Justin Hancock, a person who has cerebral palsy, has founded The Julian Way (after St. Julian of Norwich), an intentional Christian community and missional worship epicenter for disabled families. There, families will reside together in a home setting. Rev. Tom Hudspeth was born with a hearing impairment. He now leads a vibrant ministry for deaf people, among other ministries.[11] Will the wider church recognize this particular form of giftedness and support such ministers and ministries as a matter of course? Or do we need

11 http://llumc.org/new-here/about-us/pastors-and-staff/bio/dr-tom-hudspeth/

only good-looking, able-bodied young people for effective ministry? Are we merely going to minister *to* people with impairments or can we equip them *for* ministry to the body of Christ in accordance with their spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:4–31)?

"The Powers that Be"—A Health Hazard?

So far we have considered the stories in Mark on an individual and local-community level. The Markan narrative, however, was composed and heard within the larger context of a nation and an empire. This raises serious questions from a disability angle. Issues related to disability always involve all of these contexts and cannot be treated in isolation. The story of Jesus's encounter with a man possessed by demons in the country of the Gerasenes (5:1–20) emphasizes the individual, local, imperial, and even cosmic nature of our embodied experiences.

As in every healing story in Mark, one can read at a simple level: Jesus is powerful enough to do "deeds of power" (*dynameis*). But a deeper reading raises deeper questions, not only about the original context, but also our own. How might this story question us?

This healing story offers an opportunity for discussion of the connection between disability and social contexts. The story occurs outside Palestine, "on the other side of the sea" (5:1), in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. Jesus immediately encounters "a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit" (v. 2). The story provides agonizing details about the history of this man's disability (vv. 3–5) and heightens the angst by noting the chronic, frequent, and violent aspects of his torment ("often"; "night and day"; "always"). The community had tried various "remedies," including restraint with shackles and chains, but without success (v. 4). Severed from the community of the living, the man resides in isolation, his only companions the voices in his mind driving him to self-harm (vv. 8–9). He is tormented and isolated, alienated from his body, his community, and any sense of connection to God. Unlike the stories of people with physical conditions like blindness, leprosy, or a flow of blood, this narrative involves a person who has what we would call a cognitive or psychological impairment.

One problem with working towards justice for persons with disabilities is the common tendency in U.S. society not to differentiate among different kinds of disability. Some impairments are physical; some are psychological; and others are both. Persons in a wheelchair are often treated as if they have either a hearing deficit (people tend to talk louder to them) or a cognitive impairment (people tend to talk slower to them). While all persons with disabilities share experiences of discrimination and lack of access to what should be considered basic rights, the solutions needed by different groups of persons with disability are different. If we are to engage in justice work, we need to listen closely to what each group is saying about what they need and work to make that happen. It may be easier to treat disability as a "one size fits all" issue, but such an approach will fail to have a lasting effect.

While the individual man comes to "his right mind" (5:15) and follows Jesus, both the Roman Empire and those in the local community who chained the man remain associated with the "demonic." The demon, apparently individual at first, says that his name is "Legion" (v. 9), a clear reference to the Roman military,

James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836–1902). Jesus casts out the unclean spirits from the Gerasene man and sends them into the herd of swine, which plunges over the cliff. From the series "The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ." Ann Ronan Picture Collection. Photo Credit: HIP/Art Resource, NY.

which was the occupying force in the region at the time. This amusing anti-Roman political satire extends to the swine (vv. 12–13), given that the Roman military ate pigs. From the perspective of the Jewish Jesus, these animals were just as "unclean" as the spirit tormenting the man.

This story, then, shows the connection between disability and empire. Structural sin can cause disability. Could it be that this man is disabled by his own society, a territory occupied intensively by Rome? Warren Carter asks about the role of social systems in disabling people:

> Who sinned? At least in part, the empire and every and any politico-economic-cultural societal system that deprives people of adequate food resources and create[s] unjust living conditions that damage and disable people. Imperializing power and practices—whether ancient or modern, governments or multinationals—should come with a warning: they can be bad for people's health.[12]

Stories of Jesus's healing undermine and contest the empire's claims to be an agent of healing and salvation. Imperial powers, both ancient and modern, posture as providers of health and peace, and they often refer to their leaders as saviors. Yet empires send their own people to war to inflict disabilities on others, and they sustain disabilities themselves. Adela Collins wonders if "the association with tombs may indicate that the man is possessed by the spirits of those who died untimely or violent deaths."[13] As I sit here writing these words on Memorial Day, I cannot help but wonder if this man who bears the name Legion and dwells among the tombs suffers from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder.

Where Caesar fails, however, Jesus can deliver. He can heal and save (and, perhaps incidentally, also cure). He can provide true peace based on justice; and he can bring abundant, eternal life. In Jesus, not Caesar, one may find healing. The Gerasene man sides with Jesus. Do we?

12 Warren Carter, "'The blind, lame and paralyzed' (John 5:3): John's Gospel, Disability Studies, and Postcolonial Perspectives," in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 129–50 (145).

13 Collins, *Mark*, 267.

In the story, the man's community chooses to side with the empire and its values and therefore, from start to finish, promotes disability and alienation. One wonders if the community's method of "helping" the man (binding and banishing) was for his benefit or their own. Far better for him to live out in the tombs where no one has to see or deal with his affliction. The story implies that the same people who chained him are now the ones who see him unchained and healed (5:15). Rather than rejoice with him and praise God for Jesus's mighty deed, they react with fear—a word used by Mark throughout his Gospel to show lack of faith and understanding. As usual, the demons understand who Jesus is and use his correct title (Son of God), while the people who see a miracle either do not understand the power of God in Jesus or, alternatively, they *do* understand but do not want any part of it. Notice the contrast established between what the man begs for and what the people beg for: the man wants to accompany Jesus (v. 18); the people want Jesus to leave as soon as possible (v. 17).

That Jesus cast out the demons and unclean spirits shows that he has disrupted the status quo at a cosmic level. Was that not good news? Is that not good news today? But do we really welcome Jesus's call, which empowers us to "proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (3:14–15)? Or do we hear the message in a way that allows us to maintain the status quo and not get on the wrong side of the "the powers that be"? Do healing and justice for a minority group simply cost too much socially and economically?

Conclusion

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (1:14–15). Mark was obsessed with the good news; he cannot even make it through this one sentence without mentioning it twice. The time is already fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near—what are we waiting for? Reading through the lens of disability helps us question and be questioned—and so to repent of the ways in which we participate in disabling people. But repentance alone will not solve the problems. A commitment to proclaiming and believing the good news is everything. I am reminded of a saying that my colleague Theo Walker utters regularly: "If it's not good news for the poor, then it's not good news." The same is true for persons with disabilities. So, as we go forth to proclaim the gospel, let us make sure that it is always good news for everyone, including persons with disabilities.