

The whitewater rafting instructor's words are similar to those of a spiritual counselor.

“Christian living is thrilling, but there's bound to be temptation, sin, and suffering along the way. So start by putting on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:13-17). In the whirlpools of life, don't fight. Admit that you are powerless in your own strength. Believe in God's power to save you and to redeem the situation. Then prayerfully turn your will and life over to God's care. Let go and let God. He'll be able to reach you best in that position.”

Genesis 43:1-15; 1 Corinthians 7:1-9; Mark 4:35-41

Saturday, March 7

Mark 5:1-20 *They saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind.* (v.15)

“The reason the Son of God came was to destroy the devil's work” (1 John 3:8). Jesus is at it again, so let's follow up on Tuesday's discussion with a quote from Francis MacNutt's book, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*: “The flip side of preaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand is preaching that the kingdom of Satan is being destroyed. For that reason, Jesus' first act of ministry in Mark was casting out an unclean spirit from a man he met in the synagogue... ‘Deliver us from evil.’ A still more accurate translation...renders it, ‘Deliver us from the evil one’ (that is, Satan). Consequently, delivering people from evil spirits is, along with forgiving sins and healing the sick, an essential part of the Gospel.”

Very dramatically Jesus delivers from evil this possessed man of the tombs. In John 10:10 Jesus said, “The thief [Satan] comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they [this man and every tortured human being] may have life, and have it abundantly.” Be assured, Jesus is the strong deliverer! He delivers us from evil and then he delivers us to abundant life.

Genesis 43:16-34; Psalms 75, 76; 1 Corinthians 7:10-24

by Martha Emerson

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Sunday, March 1

Psalm 24 *Who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.* (vv.3b-4a NRSV)

Stationed in her rocking chair by the entrance, Iris greets me every time I pay a visit to her nursing home. Of course, Iris greets everyone, assuming they have all come to call on her. After a big hug, a smile and sometimes a few tears, she grabs my hand and begins a long rambling prayer. I'm never quite sure where her mind is, but I know her heart is certainly in the right place.

Today's Psalm 24 is thought to be part of the Hebrew liturgy used in entering the temple, perhaps in connection with carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Some must have seen the worship requirement—clean hands and pure hearts—as a ritual cleansing accomplished through animal sacrifice. Yet YHWH was always calling His people beyond this, to the deeper cleansing that comes from the heart and subsequent right actions with the hands. That perfect righteousness of heart and hand could never quite be pieced together by men, no matter how carefully they tried to follow the Law. So God sent Jesus to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins, to cleanse our hands and hearts with his purity.

Who can stand in his holy place in prayer? Iris and all the saints who have put their trust in the clean hands and pure heart of Jesus.

Genesis 41:14-45; Psalm 29; Romans 6:3-14; John 5:19-24

Monday, March 2

Mark 3:7-19a *He appointed twelve, whom he also named to be apostles, to be with him and to be sent out.* (v.14)

“Just because the other kids are fooling around in the cafeteria line doesn't mean you have to. I expect you to be a leader, to set a good example,” her father intoned.

Yes, Ellen had heard that before. It was the second verse to the discourse on self-control, obeying the rules, and doing the right thing. Her folks were always pressuring her to be a leader. She knew what she was supposed to be like, but when push-came-to-shove—literally in the lunchroom lineup—Ellen was a follower.

That Sunday the youth group talked about being a disciple called to follow Jesus. After passing out “WWJD” bracelets, the youth minister explained the “what would Jesus do” approach to life: “Since Jesus is always with us, we can just watch him in our minds, do what Jesus does, follow him.”

“Hey!” Ellen piped up, “It's alright to be a follower so long as I'm following Jesus? So I don't need to be a leader.”

“Yeah, that's it,” the youth minister came back at her, “but Jesus is a tough act to follow. You'd better get plugged into God in prayer, in the Bible,

and in the support of other Christians. Remember Christ's words to potential followers? 'Let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'"

Genesis 41:46-57; Psalms 56, 57, 58; 1 Corinthians 4:8-21

Tuesday, March 3

Mark 3:19b-35 *He casts out demons.* (v.22)

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them" (C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*).

The very idea of casting out demons seems archaic at best. Surely there were just a few mentally deranged folks that Jesus straightened out. *Not!* Such an assessment flies in the face of what Jesus actually does and says. In reading Mark this week, please note that Jesus' attack on evil spirits is no side line, but a primary part of his mission that we just can't minimize.

In yesterday's reading when Jesus called his disciples, he charged them "to proclaim the message and to have authority to cast out demons." This he repeats at the close of Mark as he leaves his ministry with these men.

In today's lesson, the only things that Jesus and the scribes agree on is that (1) there are evil spirits and (2) Jesus did drive them out of people. What they are disputing is (1) who Jesus is and (2) from whence his authority over evil comes—two questions that the demons themselves have no trouble answering! "Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!'" (Mark 3:11). Now that's authority!

Genesis 42:1-17; Psalms 61, 62; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8

Wednesday, March 4

Mark 4:1-20 *"Listen! A sower went out to sow...some seed fell on the path...on rocky ground...among thorns, and...other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain."* (vv.3-8)

A Wheat Field in Palestine Speaks Out

Waylon: It's springtime and that dern clod-hopper's gonna be out here.

Richie: Yep, spreadin' that everlastin' seed.

Waylon: Well, I got better things to do than root seed. I been a path all my life and I'm stayin' one.

Stoney: Waylon, you're haaard ground. You let them ravens flat carry off what seed lands on ya'. Now me, I takes to that seed right off...

Thorny: Then you flat give up if it don't rain soft and nice for ya. One hot day and that seed's done for.

Waylon: Face it Stoney, you just ain't got no depth and you can't stick with nothin'.

Thorny: Well, I'm figurin' on doing right well this year, seein' those brambles been cleared.

Stoney: Them briars'll come right back on ya. Good intensions you got but you ain't got the will power to have done with them worrisome thorns.

Thorny: And then there's ol' Richie yonder. He's just simple soil, humble ground, waitin'...

Waylon: Dumb as dirt, I'd call it.

Stoney: Now me, I'm so full up with rocks that I can't endure a whole season.

Thorny: And, I got the briars to worry 'bout.

Waylon: And I'm a path and I ain't about to change!

Stoney: But Richie's your open field, fertile soil type. He takes pretty well to what's laid on him 'cause he knows he's empty and he's waitin' to be filled.

Waylon: Shush, boys! That farmer comin' down my path.

Genesis 42:18-28; Psalm 72; 1 Corinthians 5:9—6:8

Thursday, March 5

Mark 4:21-34 *"For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."* (v.25)

Ouch! This painful verse is repeated four places in the gospels and it's the punch line to both the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:11-27). From these two parables, we can say that God has given every one of us spiritual gifts, talents and resources of many kinds for which we will be held accountable at the Final Judgment. Some folks won't use their gifts. Like high school French that's never practiced, spiritual gifts and spiritual tools (praying, confessing, forgiving, worshiping, and even loving) can waste away.

Other folks will gladly use all they have been given in the service of the kingdom; yet in true heavenly economics, their gifts aren't used up but multiplied. In trying to serve God, these saints willingly cross comfort zones to go beyond what they can do with their own abilities. This forces them to depend on God, who then supplies spiritual treasures in abundance. In hardship and suffering, these saints allow God to turn pain into positive gifts of maturity and empathy. So, both through servanthood and suffering, God will increase our gifts, not because we're worthy, but simply because we're in need and we ask.

At the final accounting, He'll know what we were given to work with, how we used it, and what we have returned... because all of it is His.

Genesis 42:29-38; Psalms 70, 71; 1 Corinthians 6:12-30

Friday, March 6

Psalms 69 *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.* (v.1)

"Helmet, life preserver, paddle—we'll pass those out shortly. White-water rafting is a thrill, but it can be dangerous, so listen up. Worst case: raft capsizes. Don't panic. Don't call out; we know you're in there and you'll just swallow the water. Don't swim—you're no match for the Ocoee river. Never stand up on the rocks; you'll only get bashed up in the rapids.

"So what do you do? Lie back, cross your arms over your chest and float feet first down the river. That way your guide can get a line or a paddle to you easily."