

Two Incompatible Visions: Jesus and the Olympics ***Reflections from Mark 3:1-6***

Jesus & the vision of the divine reign

Mark 3:1 Again he entered the local assembly, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2 They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Get up and come into the middle." 4 Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5 He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

This episode from the Gospel of Mark is the final incident in a series of conflict stories between Jesus and people variously designated as Pharisees, scribes, or scribes of the Pharisees (Mark 2:1 – 3:6). The entire series concludes with the Pharisees plotting with the Herodians to eliminate Jesus (3:6). How is it that these conflicts precipitated such drastic measures against Jesus? What did he do to produce such determined (and deadly) opposition? While it would be helpful to examine each of these conflict stories in detail, we can get a good sense of things by probing this final episode closely.

The setting is a local assembly in a town in the Galilee region. The term rendered "local assembly" is the word "synagogue," which is commonly understood as a building that people entered for worship. But at the time of this incident, the synagogue was not a physical structure but a regular gathering of the local population, especially the prominent families and community leaders, for social and religious purposes. Not only would scriptures be read or recited, and perhaps psalms sung, but there would also be discussion of the affairs of the town and various matters of local import.

Since this gathering occurred on the Sabbath, the occasion had marked religious and cultural significance. The Sabbath was a day carefully proscribed and protected by social regulations and communal rituals, especially focused on restricted engagement in normal daily activities and routines of work. Proper observation of the Sabbath was not only grounded in religious tradition and scriptures, it was also important as a distinct sign of cultural identity that set Judeans apart from others around them. While the first century Jewish population was geographically dispersed and theologically and culturally diverse, strict Sabbath-keeping was for many an essential part of their fidelity to their tradition and identity.

This was especially the case for the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a political-religious group based in Judea whose role in political life and influence with the governing class in Jerusalem varied throughout the pre-70 C.E. period. Although detailed information is lacking, they seemed to be a group committed to daily household practices of piety based on certain interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures ("traditions of the fathers"), especially practices concerning ritual purity, tithing, eating, marriage, and Sabbath observance. For

them, adherence to these codes of conduct was relevant not just for priests in the performance of their Temple obligations, but for all who were serious about fidelity to God and tradition.

In the episode under consideration here, the man with the withered hand was on the outside of the assembly. Being physically disabled, he would have been poor, ritually impure, non-compliant in religious matters, and likely morally suspect with his deformity perceived as a sign of divine punishment. In addition, a withered hand symbolized a state of powerlessness as the hand (*yad* in Hebrew) was frequently employed in biblical discourse as a metaphor of strength manifest in action. It is possible that he was present on this occasion to solicit alms from those gathered, but regardless of his motive for being there, his marginal location in the assembly mirrored his marginal status in the community.

Given the previous conflict stories, the Pharisees and perhaps other local authorities were carefully monitoring Jesus' every move, wanting to find grounds for launching a justifiable procedure against him that would result in his legitimate removal. It seems that an act of healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath would constitute such grounds. When Jesus invited the man to get up and come into the middle of the assembly, he was upsetting social protocols and conventions, and disturbing the arrangements of hierarchical power on which they were based. Those who supported such conventions and who undoubtedly received considerable benefit from these patterns of status and authority were on high alert: this might be the moment they were waiting for.

Before healing the man, Jesus poses a question to them: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" In light of the subsequent healing of the disabled man, determining a response to his suffering was made equivalent to doing good and preserving life (healing him then and there) or doing harm and killing (allowing him to continue suffering). In this question, Jesus exposes the real issue at stake: their response to this particular situation of human suffering is a matter of life and death, and not simply a case of interpreting certain Sabbath regulations and following specific procedures. Either they take a stand for the life and well-being of this person, or they perpetuate the ways of death. He cuts through the justifying rationale behind Sabbath regulations, the arguments for their cultural importance, and the logic of maintaining the norms of social order. This is a matter of being for life or for death.

Their silence was a clear sign of their adherence to a regulatory order of Sabbath-keeping that would prolong his suffering, and of their indifference to his plight. Jesus' response was both anger and grief. He recognized that their allegiance to these social norms, to the cultural conventions and justifying logic buttressing them, and to the arrangements of elite power that they reinforced, had produced a disturbing hardness of heart, a normalized indifference to human misery and exclusion.

In the act of healing the man's hand, with its practical and symbolic implications of empowerment, Jesus declared his stance of non-compliance with such patterns of power, and his solidarity with those adversely

affected by them. The Pharisees perceived Jesus' action as a threat to their own status and authority, and a destabilizing political force in the region. So they immediately conspired with the local political leaders, the family and friends of Herod Antipas, in an effort to eliminate him.

If Jesus was deeply disturbed by their hardness of heart, they were no doubt equally disturbed by his refusal to comply with the social *status quo*. By bringing the disabled man into the middle of the assembly, by breaking with their regulations around Sabbath adherence in his act of healing, he unsettled the hierarchical structures of power and the vested interests of those who promoted and policed the social and cultural terrain.

Fusing horizons – moving from then to now

This episode presents a great challenge for us as followers of Jesus. His action puts us under obligation to open up space in the middle – the middle of our hearts, our lives, our homes, our communities, our social institutions – for those who are weak, marginalized, poor, excluded. The middle is the place of belonging, of being valued and deemed important, of being granted respect and dignity. It is the place of healing for those suffering from personal affliction, trauma, and the social exclusion that so often attends their experience. One might also argue that by situating the poor at the centre, a way of healing is also opened up for those held in the grip of the various pathologies that accompany the wielding of dominant power.

Yet this kind of radical action requires the dismantling of the norms of our current social order, where those who occupy the centre of attention and are ascribed greatest value are the wealthy, the beautiful, the strong, the successful, the educated, the experts, the professionals. Those with power, wealth and status stand in the middle and impose their intentions; they dominate through coercive force or economic influence or social weight. Yet Jesus displaces these ones, and puts the disabled, poor, impure, non-compliant one in the middle. Fidelity to him means that we take up this revolutionary and life-giving practice as well.

Of course, to do so would be to invite opposition from the authorities; such actions of non-compliance and reversal pose a threat to elite interests. Rather than locating the poor in the middle of our lives and our communities, the social norms and dominant cultural perspectives advocate that we keep them confined in systems of control to ensure their removal from our lives. Yet participation in the movement of God embodied in Jesus, which makes solidarity with the poor its fundamental stance, calls us to expose and resist the rationalizing logic and reinforcing behaviors of the status quo, and summons us to reorder our lives around and alongside the weak and the poor, to grant urgency to the alleviation of their suffering, and to prioritize their empowerment. This is the way of God in the world, and as Christ-followers, this is to be our way.

Walking this path requires an alternative vision, one formed by engaging with and reflecting on the narrative accounts of Jesus' life and mission, allowing them to fashion our own perceptions, imaginations, and actions in the world. The dynamics of this particular episode (Mark 3:1-6) – bringing into the middle those who are marginalized as an act of healing and empowerment, and thereby reversing the hierarchical power arrangements of the dominant society – reveal the divine intention among us, and provide a framework through which we can evaluate our own historical context. In this way, the stories about Jesus and the parables he told can serve as tools for social analysis to expose the unjust and exploitative structures within which we are embedded. Perceiving these forces at work in the ancient accounts of Jesus enables us to better read our culture, to discern more clearly how systems of domination and marginalization work; and this understanding can open up possibilities of non-compliant, alternative vision and action.

In the context of first century life in Galilee and Judea, certain culturally marked occasions (e.g., Sabbath days, annual festivals, community assemblies, etc.), while originally established to nourish communal solidarity and vitality, had become sites for publicly demonstrated power, authority and status. The rituals and regulations that attended them reinforced a transcript of domination and subordination that served the interests of those in power and maintained their hold on the reins of social control. Since the local hierarchies of power were amplified on these occasions, they provided opportunities to see more clearly the normalized patterns of oppression. For Jesus, these became occasions of conflict, and his resistance to the systems of domination they encoded surfaced more frequently there. In refusing to comply with Sabbath regulations, for example, he was challenging the entire structure of power and control upheld by authoritative cultural institutions and their leading personnel.

Within our own cultural setting, there are public ceremonies and rituals that likewise encode social arrangements of privilege and power that are advantageous to the elite. These occasions are scripted to present a vision of the world that is most amenable to elite interests, one that promotes the normalization of particular ideologies, modes of rationality, and political and economic values especially conducive to the maintenance of elite status. They function to justify and legitimate domination by the wealthy and powerful, and to elicit popular consent and cooperation. In the process, the afflicted and the poor are cast aside as human waste, or carefully monitored as potential sources of disruption or threats to the public transcript of harmony and benevolence that the ruling elite and their supporters wish to project.

The vision offered by the Olympic Games

The spectacular public ritual of the Olympic Games is a primary example of such an occurrence. In both their summer and winter formats, they occasion a massive and concentrated convergence of state and corporate power. Managed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and accompanied by various international and national sporting committees, the Olympic Industry packages its product as a sporting event that combines national cooperation and healthy competition as a catalyst for peace and hope in the world. Yet the

tremendous resources put into this spectacle by both the governments of the host country and city and the sponsoring and supporting corporations raises suspicions about the vested interests embedded in this spectacle and its production.

The state pumps massive resources into the Games in the form of substantial public money for infrastructure (necessary Olympic sports venues, athlete housing, transportation, other supporting facilities, city beautification projects, etc.) and security (both security personnel and equipment). In return it gains the loyalty of its citizens through the endless promotion of the Games as good for the local economy, good for its global profile, and good for the collective national spirit. As these interests are reiterated, and as the performance of the host country's Olympic athletes is lauded and applauded, citizens become more deeply entrenched in patterns of nationalism and state control.

Corporate interests are served through official sponsorships and advertising promotion. Large corporations pay millions to the IOC so that their brands and logos can be accompanied by the five rings, and they can benefit from the IOC's monopoly on public advertising space for the duration of the Games. Corporate media also profit immensely from the Olympics because of their ability to deliver huge audiences to corporate advertisers, solidifying viewers' commitment to consumption. Ironically, through the framework of an athletic spectacle, with its emphasis on fitness, discipline and strength, people are aggressively solicited with products that undermine personal health (Coca-cola, McDonalds) and environmental well-being (GM, Petro-Canada).

In the local context of the Olympic Games, large real estate corporations and development companies make substantial profits from inflated market prices and new opportunities for expansion, and the notion of private property as the fundamental value of economic growth is reinforced. The forces of gentrification are intensified in the period leading up to the Games as real estate in the low-income neighborhoods of the city is targeted for 'revitalization' and rental prices soar as the prospect of global investment accompanies the international profile of the Olympics. Indeed, it is the potential for substantial real estate profits that drives much of the frenzy around hosting the Games, and for those with significant financial resources, these conditions produce a windfall opportunity for increasing personal wealth.

All the while, the ideology of competition seeps into our consciousness as the fundamental *modus operandi* of modern social existence. The Olympic Games and the whole industry that surrounds them cast a dazzling vision of the world in which there are winners and losers, and only the fittest survive with dignity. We are spectacularly reinserted into patterns of individualized competition, detrimental consumption, and passive submission to the various mechanisms of state and corporate control. The bottom line is winning, defeating challengers, dominating the field, whether in the realm of elite sports or corporate profits or government control. In this way, the Olympics serve to deepen our entrenchment into the matrix of the state and

corporate power, solidify their control on our lives, and inscribe values and desires that benefit their interests.

The vision promoted by the Olympics is decisively not about justice, equality, cooperation, care, inclusion. The region hosting the Olympics is strewn with the devastating fallout and collateral damage that attend such mega-events. Poor people experience increased displacement, eviction and homelessness, and become the target of clean-up campaigns as the site is made ready for the international gaze. The exploitation and trafficking of women and children to service the pleasures of the participants and visitors rise substantially during the Games. Civil liberties are curtailed and dissent punished through increased by-law enforcement strategies. The desire to win at all costs fuels corruption at many levels (athletes, IOC officials, contractors, developers, politicians, etc.), as previous Games have well illustrated. The advent of the Games generates renewed efforts at promoting tourist development and resource extraction on the unceded territory of indigenous communities, adding another layer of exploitation and injustice to the historical record of colonial oppression. Substantial environmental destruction occurs in the build-up to the Olympics, as transportation improvements and venue construction are expedited; and with hundreds of flights bringing thousands of people to the Games, carbon emission rates increase significantly.

All of these testify to the reality lying below the surface: violence, destruction and human suffering accompany the Games and are systemic to them. The truth is that the Olympic Games is a showcase event for elite power that strengthens its grip on dominant systems of control and exploitation, cloaked in a rhetoric of humanitarian goodwill. It is a dazzling spectacle produced and promoted by people in positions of immense power offering us a presentation of the world they heartily endorse. They employ it as a means of inscribing the masses into the values and beliefs of that world so that they might embrace its totalizing vision or at the very least passively allow it to seep into their consciences. By careful design, the spectacle hides from view the injustice and inequality on which it is founded, and the death, violence, destruction, and exploitation that undergirds the power of its backers. It presents its version of reality as natural, rational, benign or even beneficial to participants and spectators. It projects a social vision favorable to elite interests, one populated by individual consumers competing with each other for success, where perceptions of equality and fairness are ritually and rhetorically scripted, yet only winners get recognition and approval.

Incompatible visions & the challenge of faithful discipleship

This vision is strikingly at odds with that of Jesus who calls the poor and disabled into the centre of the collective gathering, and in so doing challenged the structures of hierarchical power that dominated his day. If we stand with him, we find ourselves in solidarity with the poor, weak and oppressed, and consequently fundamentally opposed to the version of the world sponsored by elite power, profit and privilege of the Olympic Industry. Of course its vision is ubiquitous in our culture and has been fully operative long before the Olympics come to town. The presence of the Olympics only serves to highlight its dynamics and amplify

its consequences so that they become more visible. Being awakened to these dynamics, however, and aware of their incommensurability with the vision of God's reign as embodied in Jesus, we must find creative and courageous ways to resist and subvert them, as we make room for the poor and the weak in the middle of our lives, our homes and our communities. The social reversal at the heart of this vision is captured powerfully in the words of the Magnificat:

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

May we live into this reality through resistance to the dominant cultural vision and embodiment of alternative, liberating practices.