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OUR THIEVING LORD

Mark 3:20-34

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Mark's gospel is picking up steam. Today we have an incredibly intense passage. People call Jesus "mad", his family tries to restrain him, and the powers-that-be call him the devil. In these few verses, he is accused of being a deluded, demon-possessed, embarrassment.

He is getting hit from all sides, but his verbal dexterity turns the tables on all these would-be assailants as this gospel reaches a mini-crescendo. Jesus puts them in their place by claiming to be a thief in the night, who breaks into the house of power and binds the Strong Man of rumor, of shameful propriety, and ossified tradition. This is my favorite passage in Mark.

It begins, not surprisingly, once again with the clamoring crowd who cannot get enough of him. Back in Chapter 2, Verse 2 the crowd was pressing in so tightly there was no room to move (move over Taylor Swift). Today they are so incessant, like paparazzi chasing the royals, there is not time even to eat.

This, in and of itself, was improper – to have throngs pressing around during dinner time. It was a time of ritualized fellowship and marked the rhythm of life and the day. Like my mother who said no phone calls at the dinner table; it was unseemly to have crowds pressing in like this.

This is Mark equipping his readers to respond to the debates of his day. Was Jesus the Son of God, a political upstart, a religious heretic, a deluded visionary or a demon-filled minion? Read this passage and find out.

The accusation that would be most damaging to this movement of course was that he was a servant of demons. Up to this point, Jesus had debated with local authorities, but word must have spread. This

time, the heavy hitters from the seat of religious power rise up from Jerusalem to find this Nazarene and discredit him before the crowd.

They are calling him the equivalent of a communist during the Cold War. It was an accusation, whether there was any credence or not, that would instantly cast suspicion upon the person and lead people to flee.

I am sure many of you remember those days. Perhaps some of you have suffered such accusations, whether it was whispers of communism in the Cold War, unfounded rumors of malfeasance, and maybe even pernicious gossip about your children. Erma Bombeck's old quote is even more true today, "Some say our national pastime is baseball. Not me. It's gossip."

We find ourselves raging, in a time of random accusations, seeking to paint people as devils of one sort or another. Once the rumors begin, they can destroy a life. One pediatric medical doctor in a small town had unfounded accusations destroy his practice. By the time the truth became clear, it was too late. He closed his practice and had to leave town.

As Christians, we must always remember that it is the truth that sets us free while at the same time, in the end, we are all human, broken, and faulty. Edward R. Murrow had an interesting insight during the Cold War, "No one man can terrorize a whole nation unless we are all his accomplices."

So, though it was the seat of power that sought to undo Jesus, in this passage we see not only is the crowd complicit by calling him crazy, but his family is as well by trying to restrain him!

Nevertheless, Jesus does not back down but goes toe-to-toe in this war of myths. Mark has already established Jesus' power over the powers of darkness. In Chapter Five he will encounter a demon so strong that no one can restrain him, not even with a chain. It was such power that led to today's accusations.

Jesus is not the strong man, but the stronger man. And the chains he breaks will be the ones of oppression of the people, while binding the forces of evil and cowardice that seek to perpetuate their grip of fear.

In no uncertain terms he has told them he will plunder their house of power. Of course, this is taken as a physical threat to others as are his words about the destruction of the temple.

But Jesus does not wield power like that of the world. We see, in fact, that his power to unbind others is drawn from his willingness to be bound, or rather whipped, beaten, and hanged on a tree. That is his power. Jesus is the stronger man, but that strength is found in service, truth, and sacrifice.

Because of this, the comment that he is crazy cannot squelch the adulation of the crowds for he has healed them and fed them. The religious elite, with their accusations that Jesus is possessed, cannot stop the crowd's devotion, for he has welcomed sinners and tax collectors to his table.

Even the legions of Rome will not slow him down, not even by crucifying him. For he will rise up and, ironically, eventually the center of power that sought to bring him down will become the most enduring and influential center of his support on this planet – the Vatican in Rome.

You already know of Jesus' sacrifice, love, and compassion that wins the world. But, to this list, our passage adds another critical weapon in Jesus' arsenal for salvation.

Thievery – a sneaky thief.

I am the good shepherd, I am the vine, I am the bread of life...I am the thief?! It does not have the same ring to it.

If this metaphor only appeared in this passage, we might dismiss it as a one-time analogy rather than a critical strategy of God.

But such imagery appears over and again, as in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." And in Revelation 3:3, "Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you."

Thus, Jesus' words to the scribes in our passage about sneaking in and binding the strong man is more than a threat to them, apparently it is a strategy of God for us all. Think about this imagery, by definition it is subversive. Since we were very young, we have been told it was wrong to steal. "Thou shall not steal." It's one of the commandments. And yet, God insists upon this metaphor and Jesus will sneak not just into the lives of those bent on evil, but ours as well.

This thief image should be unsettling to us. Thieves steal more than our possessions. A robber is someone who confronts us, maybe on the street, threatens us with violence and takes our wallet. But a thief sneaks into our home! They take our peace of mind, our sense of security, and potentially all our secrets. Nothing can remain hidden from a good thief.

The thief is a stealthy, hidden presence in which you never know what corner of your life they might be lurking in, waiting to pounce. But Jesus is no ordinary thief. He is not looking to accrue wealth.

In Augustine's *Confessions* he describes a youthful zeal for robbery,

To shake and rob this [pear tree] some of us wanton young fellows went, late

one night ...and carried away great loads, not to eat ourselves, but to fling to the very swine, having only eaten some of them; ... having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved to perish. I loved my own error.

Augustine reveled in the flesh. He engaged in several affairs and went to the Coliseum. But overtime, like a thief, Jesus stole his enjoyment of such pleasures of the flesh. And Augustine could not even retreat into the privacy of his thoughts. Even there, he was hounded by a presence. Like a thief in the night, God will steal our comfort and security and turn our lives upside-down, if necessary.

The people I have come to know in Haiti have a tremendous faith, born of adversity, and a spirit of love and fellowship. I remember one pastor whose faith was remarkable; his willingness to work hard left me in awe. In order to go to seminary, they not only have to work a full-time job all day but then must travel an hour to get to class (for two hours) and then another hour of travel to return. It takes supreme dedication, but his story revealed his motivation.

He grew up in Cité Soleil, which is controlled by gangs who divide up the territory. It is filled with drugs, violence, and fear. Those who lead the gangs, compared to others, command respect and have goods and pleasures others cannot access. This young man had all of that. But, like a thief, Christ struck him in his heart and stole his ability to enjoy his life of power.

He not only gave up his material prosperity and pleasures that went with it, but Christ commanded him to work to convert the very men with whom he fought for territory. Most laughed at him and thought him a fool. But now that he has gone to seminary and become part of the church, he knows that the only thing that Christ stole from him were false gods and empty pleasures.

I think he would have agreed with Augustine's later reflection, "...serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

Give even the smallest corner in your heart to Christ and, like a thief, he will rob you of your settled life. And then, and only then, you will know the true life that enlignens the world. Amen.