

WEEKLY REFLECTION

Vladimir Korotkov

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Mark 9.38-50

Introduction

Most human beings live life as if society has insiders and outsiders. An “us” and “them”. The familiar, the strange. Our inner lives and our cultures are unconsciously shaped by our social and historical contexts. We then form a range of beliefs about inside and outside, based on our sense of security, our fears, anxieties and the influence of our family and society. And we relate to others through this meaning construction.

In our story in Mark 9: 38-50, Jesus actually shifts us beyond a naïve, unreflective, unconscious acceptance of how we construct and live out our group boundaries and segregated belonging. He confrontingly invites us to set out on an intentional journey of transformation, to purge, to cast out, our individual and collective egos, to move past the naïve and safe assumptions of good inside-bad outside.

We will start with a few stories that illustrate the consequences of unreflective living.

How we relate to others has power-full consequences

The former Bishop Brian Kyme of the Diocese of Perth shared a powerful story a few years ago from the popular American author William Sydney Porter, using the pen name O. Henry, which really hits home on this issue of how we treat others, with a twist:

This particular story tells of a little girl whose mother had died, and would wait all day for her father to come home from work. She desperately wanted to sit with him to receive some sign of his affection. But every night her father followed the same routine. ... eat his meal flop in his favourite chair, light up his pipe and read until it was time for bed. When the little girl came to sit with him he would always reply in the same way. Can't you see that your daddy is tired? Why don't you go outside and play?' The little girl would go outside and amuse herself as best she could. Eventually the inevitable happened. As the girl grew older she began to accept expressions of affection from any one who offered them ... in time she became a woman of ill-repute. One day the girl died and approached the gates of heaven. Peter saw her coming and said to Jesus, Here's a bad one, Lord. She is a woman of ill-repute and there is only one place for her'. Then comes the surprise ending of the story. Jesus says to Peter, 'Let her come into heaven and when her father comes, hold him responsible for her life'.

The point O. Henry makes is very clear. How we relate and do not relate to others has consequences. In family systems studies, the father in this story is stuck in distancing and underfunctioning. He is emotionally and relationally disconnected, probably repeating generations of norms, values and behaviour. And the story

suggests that God will be merciful to those who through no fault of their own are excluded. But God will be demanding of those who are responsible for the exclusion.

Good inside – strange, excluded outside

Alicja Iwanska, in her cultural anthropological study of a group of white middle class suburbanites living in NW USA in the late 1970s', found that they divided people of various cultures into three spaces or categories. Strange people, the most distant space,

such as Native Americans, were related to as scenery. Reservations were visited as they would visit a zoo. Second space: workers, Mexican migrant workers, were categorised as machinery, valued for manual labour, and sent away when they were no longer useful. Not all humans were seen as people. Only friends, family and those with similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds were accepted as people. This form of unreflective carving up our life-worlds, of good inside and strange, object-like others outside, breeds various forms of imbalanced power relations.

Mark creates our story out of an event and a series of proverbs to empower his community to face challenges of exclusive group identity and lack of power sharing

In the reading for this week in Mark's Gospel, John, one of the leadership group, confidently tells Jesus that "they" made a judgement about a person outside their group who was casting out, purging if you like, demons out of people in the name of Jesus. John operates *as if* there are insiders and outsiders, carving society up into "us" and those who are identified as strangers. Ched Myers writes, "The arrogance in John's objection lies in its attempt to erect boundaries around the exercise of compassionate ministry ..."

And this is an issue of individual and group exclusivity *and* power, as to who has control about what is good and bad, and who can express the good.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, in a similar story, when Joshua wants to stop an exorcist, Moses bluntly questions: "Are you jealous?" And John is asleep to his contradictory behaviour. He is "blind to his blindness" (Claudio Naranjo)

Last week in Mark 9:33-37 we read that the disciples were in competition with each other for community power. Jesus teaching about the way of the cross, the way of Jesus' values, life and mission, finds contrary expression in his followers norms, values, and use of power and belonging. In Mark 9:33 Jesus calls all who wish to follow him to live in an alternative way: "whoever desires to be first must be last of all, and servant of all". And this servanthood is never subservience to any dominating master: the only master-mistress we serve is "love", of powerful expressions of compassion, a "practice that will bring new order within everyday life" (Ched Myers).

And the response of Mark's Jesus to John is abrupt and firm: do not stop a person using power-serving love for the good of others! Mark follows this with three grotesque metaphors; drowning oneself, mutilating hand, foot, or eye. Typical of Ancient Near Eastern cultural rhetoric, such exaggerated hyperbole carries multiple layers of complexity and meaning. Jesus actually stresses the utmost value of the whole social body, every member, particularly the smallest, the least, and nothing must tear it apart. There is a deeper implied layer is this teaching that he will be

crucified by the religious and political bodies, that his body will be torn apart for the abundant life of the whole social body.

And the salt image is powerful: salt was a vital commodity then, it was shared at gatherings and meals, and salt was also used in the preparation of ritual sacrifices; is this a sign of the readiness to be sacrificed?

So, then, to have salt is to engage in the sacrifice, the giving up, of purging ourselves and our communities of those things that keep us exclusive and holding on to unequal power.

Ched sums up that the intention of Mark's Jesus in these chapters is to "begin to unmask the disciples' true aspirations to power."

Opening spaces to unveil and purge our individual and collective egos

How then do we engage in intentional, brave, self-and-community reflection on every part of our lives? Unveil, unmask, to then purge and let go?

The father in our first story lives unconsciously; asleep within a shut-down life; how does he wake up, unveil, unmask, purge, let go? Of course, overfunctioning on our terms can equally shut others down by the controlled caring.

The people in Iwanska's study in NW American live unconsciously, constructing binaries and make objects out of strangers; how do they wake up? The poet T S Eliot observed, "But most people are only very little alive". (T S Eliot, *After Strange Gods*) Claudio Naranjo, psychiatrist and a key leader in the Enneagram personality programme and spiritual director, further observed, that human beings actually choose selective ways to sustain unconsciousness. He says the Genesis story of the fall is about our spiritual fall,; psychology teaches us of our inner neuroses and defense mechanism, evident in John and the disciples. Naranjo continues: "The fall is such that awareness comes to be blind in regard to its own blindness." Exclusivity, competition, jealousy all arise from within our inner life and cultural defensive postures, associated with fears, anxieties, anger, loss, failure, lack of self. And Naranjo goes on to say, we develop such unconscious strategies because of the fall, or degradation, is formed because we have not developed our full potential. We were separated from God *and* our self.

Conclusion: how do we choose to live consciously and honour our unconscious

How do I attempt to live consciously and honour my unconscious? To unveil how I am blind in my blindness? There are many intentional ways that exist. One of the self-and-other reflection modes that I use is the Enneagram as a guide, a spirituality process. It sets out how nine personality types are blind to our blindness, enabling us to become conscious of our unconscious, recognising our defensive strategies chosen by our "false self", recognising underfunctioning or over functioning; observing how power is used, and processing this discovery and journeying into letting go and ongoing healing.

I encourage you to find an intentional spirituality that works for you.

God calls us through this text today to take a journey of discovery into the virtually uncharted territory of our own inner and communal lives. A personal journey of mind, heart, sense, and imagination, to address our power and meaning systems, to enable us to be strengthened to address power and systems, to journey together into God and into our life-worlds.

And insight and contemplation of the bad inside, so we can be free of fear and anxiety, so we can change our valuing and appreciating.

Power is about serving love, about love as relationship and collaboration, shared-equal-power-with, which is our purpose, vision and mission.

To conclude with Brene Brown insightful words:

Spirituality is recognising and celebrating that we are inextricably connected to one another by a power greater than us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and belonging. Practicing spirituality brings sense of perspective, meaning and purpose to our lives.
(Rising Strong)