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How Matthew Elbowed Mark Aside and Became the #1 Gospel

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Most scholars believe that Mark is the oldest of our four canonical gospels, and that Matthew and Luke independently wrote their gospels primarily by revising Mark's. Matthew especially embellished Mark so powerfully that we tend to remember Matthew's version of episodes rather than Mark's. Thanks to his provocative embellishments, Matthew elbowed Mark aside and successfully laid claim to being the #1 gospel in the New Testament. In this class we will focus especially on Matthew's re-write of the baptism of Jesus, the Walking on the Water, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, and the ending of the gospel. We will combine careful reading of gospel texts with spiritual reflection on their possible meaning for each of us today.

- Remember how Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, John initially resisted the request, but then relented and baptized Jesus? That's Matthew, not Mark.

(Hint: Why would Matthew tell us that John had reservations about baptizing Jesus? Could it be because John was offering a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"? What sins do you suppose Jesus needed to confess and repent of? Moreover, doesn't being baptized by John imply that John had superior status to Jesus? See the problems that Matthew is attempting to soften, if not actually resolve, in Mark's story?)

- Remember how Jesus came to the disciples in the boat, walking on the water? At first they were terrified, but then Peter hopped out of the boat and joined Jesus briefly in walking on the water. That's Matthew, not Mark.

(Hint: in Mark, the disciples are persistently clueless, failing to understand what Jesus is about and failing to walk faithfully in his path. In Mark's water-walking story, the disciples are terrified and clueless, as Jesus walks towards them, through the wind, on the waves, in the dark. But Matthew has Peter hop out of the boat and take a few steps on the water, thus rescuing a bit of the disciples' reputation that is so badly tarnished in Mark.)

- Remember this? Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" Then Jesus congratulated Simon for receiving a divine revelation, calling him "Peter," the "rock" on which the church would be built, and giving him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The congratulations, "rock," and "keys" are all missing in Mark. They only appear in Matthew.

(Hint: in Mark, it is frequently Peter himself whose credentials as a disciple are tarnished. In the Caesarea Philippi episode in Mark, he identifies Jesus correctly ("Christ"), but he doesn't understand what he is saying, because as soon as Jesus starts talking about rejection, suffering, and death, Peter gets in his face and "rebukes" him. Matthew radically transforms Mark's account by having Jesus praise Peter to the skies, thus rescuing Peter's reputation forever.)

- How about the ending of the story? Do you recall the guard set at the tomb of Jesus, two named women go to the tomb early on Sunday morning, an angel descends from heaven to roll away the stone from the tomb, the resurrected Jesus appears to the women, and finally he appears majestically to eleven disciples on a mountain-top in Galilee, giving them the "Great Commission" to evangelize the world? None of that is in Mark; all of it is in Matthew only.

(Hint: Mark's ending is short, mysterious, unresolved, stressing fear and silence. But who wants to end a gospel like that? Matthew expands the ending immensely, tying up loose ends, solving puzzles, still pointing to some fear but now fear overcome by great joy, and we conclude with a glorious mountaintop experience. Who wouldn't go for Matthew's glory over Mark's mystery?)

In summary, Matthew embellishes Mark when he:

- puts on John's lips an acknowledgement of the awkwardness and embarrassment of Jesus submitting to John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

- salvages a bit of the disciples' tarnished reputation in Mark by having Peter take a few steps on the water.

- insists that Peter did in fact understand what Jesus was about, which led to Jesus congratulating him glowingly for having received a divine revelation, giving him his nickname "Rock," and handing him the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

- greatly expands the ending of Mark's Gospel, tying up loose ends, filling in gaps, solving mysteries, turning fear into joy, silence into proclamation, and more.

And thus does Matthew elbow Mark aside and become the #1 gospel in the New Testament.

Objective # 1: To Recognize and Appreciate the Narrative Integrity of the Gospels

Sunday by Sunday at Trinity Cathedral, we are blessed to be exposed to a broad sweep of our biblical heritage. Often we are exposed to no less than four different scripture passages, one from the Hebrew Bible, another from the Psalms, often an epistle reading, and last, but certainly not least, a reading from one of the gospels. Our lectionary follows a three-year cycle in which the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) take turns being in the spotlight, with passages from John's Gospel periodically inserted in the midst of readings from the Synoptics. (This practice is just one of many things I find curious about the construction of the lectionary.)

On the whole, I celebrate the fact that the lectionary exposes us, in a disciplined manner, to vast portions of the Bible. This is a superior approach to the use of scripture in worship than what I experienced as a lad growing up in the Methodist Church, in the days before our contemporary lectionaries were created and used regularly, days in which a preacher often chose one particular passage to read in worship and on which to base the sermon. Often a solitary reading from the Bible was all we heard. Our far more ambitious approach in the 21st century, with many

denominations using the Revised Common Lectionary, does a much better job of honoring the richness of the Bible in all its amazing breadth.

That said, I find myself regularly frustrated by what the lectionary throws at us, especially with regard to gospel passages. While it is true that in 'Matthew's year' in the lectionary (or Mark's, or Luke's), the spotlighted gospel is tracked week after week, thus giving us samplings of the whole thing, the fact that these gospel readings are but bite-sized pieces of the whole is a big problem, if understanding and resonating with the whole is important to us. Each of our gospels is a unified, integral whole, begging to be experienced and understood as a whole. Each gospel has its own unique narrative integrity, which is almost impossible to appreciate if we experience a gospel only as bite-sized pieces spread out over months.

Some analogies from other arenas of life may help us to understand the profound limitations in encountering the gospels in bite-sized pieces. Let's say we walk into a gallery in the Cleveland Museum of Art, and we stand entranced before a large painting, let's say 10' x 10' in size. Can you imagine a docent urging us to concentrate on a 6" x 6" area in the lower left corner of the painting, neglecting the rest of the painting? Wouldn't that feel strange? Or let us cross the street, enter Severance Hall, to listen to the orchestra play Beethoven's 5th symphony. Wikipedia suggests that Beethoven's 5th can take anywhere from 30 to 40 minutes to perform, but what if I crept up behind Franz Welser-Möst, tugged on his coattails, and begged him to do only a three-minute portion from the middle of the symphony? He would think me insane, wouldn't he? But we do something analogous with the gospels every Sunday. We read aloud Episode M from Matthew, but without reviewing Episodes ...J, K, L that preceded, and without looking ahead at Episodes N, O, P... that will follow. We treat the gospels in piecemeal fashion in a way we would never do to a painting in the Cleveland Museum or Art or to a symphony in Severance Hall.

My "Matthew Elbowed Mark Aside..." set of presentations is not a fullscale exploration of either Matthew or Mark, but it's a step in that direction. I hope your experience of "Matthew Elbowed..." intrigues and entices you to study the narrative integrity of our gospels on your own!

**Objective #2: To Practice Recognizing and Accepting "Difference,"
Both in the Gospels and in Our Own Lives**

First, can we study the Bible carefully enough to be able to recognize the abundant, profound differences to be found therein?

Second, can we study these differences carefully, thoughtfully, sympathetically enough to be able to understand where they come from and how they arose?

Third, can we find a way to respect and live with these differences, all the while remaining faithful to our own particular perspective on the issues raised by them?

Fourth, can this encounter with difference in the Bible help us to recognize, understand, and live with differences of all sorts in our own lives?

FYI, the four New Testament gospels (for what it's worth, many gospels have survived outside the New Testament!) are all different, sometimes radically different, from each other. Yes, there are family resemblances among them, but stark differences are also there. If you have biological siblings, you probably understand this from personal experience. Both my wife and I have three siblings; thus, both of us are one sibling in a set of four, just like the family of the four NT gospels. Among all of these sets of four siblings, there are similarities to be sure, but crucial differences as well. The challenge is to recognize, understand, be challenged by, enjoy, and live happily with those differences as inspiration for dealing with the differences we encounter daily in our own lives.