## Invitation to the Table

I love hiking. There's a favorite place in the Rocky Mountains—on the Eastern slope of the Pecos Wilderness in New Mexico. The trail heads at 8,250 feet above sea level and follows Windsor Creek for 7 miles to Lake Katherine, nestled in a glacial cirque 11,740 feet above sea level.

The trail leads through groves of Quaking Aspen, so called because their leaves are green on top and sort of silver on the bottom, and when the wind blows and the leaves shake, at a distance it looks as if the whole grove is shimmering or shaking. In the fall when the leaves turn, the mountainside is a spectacular shade of brilliant yellow.

But here's the thing about Quaking Aspens: there will be hundreds of white-barked trunks. But it's all one plant all part of an interdependent network of roots.

In Cowles, a tiny village near the trailhead, a homeowner owner planted two Quaking Aspens; one on each side of the driveway. When we were there six years ago, those lonely specimens were in very poor health compared to the vibrant groves clustered together up on the mountain. We asked the Ranger about those trees, and she said the sickly trees don't have any supportive system of roots, so they don't thrive.

You see where I'm going? God created this universe so that every part contributes in some way to every other part. The universe is one interdependent system—including humans, each with unique qualities and value, but with a need for interconnectedness. We may shine in our individual skills and talents; but we thrive in community.

At the Table we express our need for each other. At the Table we are one in our common need for God's grace. At the Table we remember a life of sacrificial love, and that common memory becomes the root system that unites and empowers us to follow him.

## When the Rocks Cry Out

MARK 7:31-37 (NRSVUE) *Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.* 32 *They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.* 33 *He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.* 34 *Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."* 35 *And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.* 36 *Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.* 37 *They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

LUKE 19:37-40 (NRSVUE) *Now as he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,* 38 *saying,*

*"Blessed is the king*
*who comes in the name of the Lord!*
*Peace in heaven,*
*and glory in the highest heaven!"*

39 *Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."* 40 *He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."*

**The Word of God for the people of God!**

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Did you notice—surely you noticed—in the reading from Mark's gospel, the man was deaf and had a speech impediment, and Jesus healed him and then—did you notice?—then Jesus told the people not to tell anybody. Isn't that strange? Mark says the more he ordered them to keep quiet, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

In Mark 1:24 a man with an unclean spirit says, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus tells the unclean spirit, "Be quiet! Come out of him!"

In Mark 1:43-45, Jesus heals a leper and tells him to keep quiet about it; but the man blabbed it all over town.

In Mark 8:22-26, Jesus heals a blind man and tells him not to tell anyone in the village.

In Mark 8:27-30, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and when Peter answers, "You're the Christ—the Messiah—the Son of God," Jesus responds, "Shhhh! Don't tell anybody!"

Mark 9:2-9—the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John: "Keep quiet about this."

It's a literary motif used by Mark called the "Messianic Secret." Some have criticized the use of the term, "literary motif," or "literary device" as a denial of divine inspiration; so I offer a free lecture on the nature of Scripture, and specifically the nature of Gospel.

It's crucial that we understand what a Gospel is; how it differs from biography, history, journalism, drama, or inspirational and devotional reading; although, it

involves all the above. Just the word, itself: "gospel" literally means "good news." But any other literary type can also convey good news. Gospel is more than that.

The Gospels were not written as "books" to be circulated and sold in bookstores. They were written to be read aloud in worship services of early Christian communities in one continuous reading. A powerful movie's meaning and impact is lost if you enter in the middle. Gospel is best experienced by hearing it read straight through from beginning to end, in Mark's case, about 1:20.[1]

(1) Gospels share and interpret stories as the fulfillment of expectations and hopes; specifically, an interpretation of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment and completion of the intentions and purposes of God implied in creation, given structure in the covenant with Abraham, and proclaimed by the prophets. This is what these events mean. This is their significance.

(2) Gospel is a community project, passed from person to person, group to group, generation to generation in the preaching, teaching and worship of the church, in its hymns and codes of morality and ethical relationships. It represents, not a chain of individual writings, but the cumulative witness of the church in the first generations of its existence.

(3) Gospel is inspired writing. I would argue that divine inspiration is not word-for-word dictation, but rather a clear and acute understanding of how God is involved in the events that make up the content of the testimony, and how God's involvement makes a difference in the lives of the people and the community of faith.

(4) Although each Gospel represents the inspired witness of the church, each is also the literary composition of an author who had to decide how to begin, structure, and conclude it; what to include and what to omit; what communication strategy would most effectively communicate the inspired message to readers.

Luke acknowledges in his prologue that many had written before him, and he has gathered, compiled, edited, and interpreted those collected testimonies. Most scholars agree that Mark's was the first Gospel, along with another source, now lost, called, "Q" (from the Latin quell, which means, "source"). Matthew was next, and used Mark and Q, and Luke was third, using all the above, and likely more.

And so, a Gospel, like every other form of testimony in the New Testament, is simultaneously a historical document, a literary composition, and a theological reflection, all of which combine to produce a witness of faith in the one who is the focus of the testimony.

And, finally, as "Word of God," a Gospel is not complete when the author lays down his pen. Once written, it must be read and understood. And since Gospel

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 105). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

includes history, literary composition, and theological reflection, it is appropriate; indeed, it is advisable to use the tools of those same disciplines in its interpretation.

Calling Mark's Messianic Secret a literary motif or device does not detract from the divine inspiration and authority behind his Gospel.

Mark writes in two parts. In the first part, Jesus is portrayed as the powerful Son of God who confronts the threats that rob God's people of authentic life: meaninglessness; natural disaster; loneliness; alienation; guilt; hunger; sickness; and the ultimate enemy—death. In this section, Jesus does what only God can do.

In the second part, Jesus is human—in solidarity with the weak and the vulnerable. The miracles cease, and he himself is a victim of human sin and death.[2]

And it's all held together by this secrecy motif: Jesus manifests the power of God, but is not recognized by the characters in the story until after the cross and resurrection. Mark is saying to his readers: "Don't get ahead of the story! Don't jump to conclusions. The true meaning of Jesus' life is not here in the miracles. You get it wrong if you go "all in" at this point. What is indispensable to true Christian faith is what God accomplished in the crucifixion and resurrection (which opens a whole 'nother can of worms Christians have been arguing over for 2,000 years).

But, see, here's the thing: volumes have been written on why Mark uses secrecy as part of his message; but *whatever* Mark's literary purpose may have been in having Jesus say, "Shhh! Don't tell anybody," Mark's conclusion is that it didn't work!

In today's reading, ***"…the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it."***

In Luke's Gospel—the narrative we read on Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem and the people are carrying on and disturbing the peace and ***"Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the rocks would cry out."***

God's people today are a lot better at keeping the secret; leaving it in the safety of the church between Sundays. And in our silence the wrong people are out in the world telling our story in the wrong way.

In the text from Mark, the man was deaf, but he heard Jesus. His tongue was tied, but Jesus released his tongue. The message seems clear: when ears are opened by Christ's love and tongues are released by the sound of is voice, the good news of Jesus could not then—and cannot today—be hidden or silenced or controlled; and when God's people are silent, the rocks will cry out in our place.

[2] Ibid., page 105-106