

Mark 2: 1-12 "An Uprising" Rev. Janet Chapman 2/11/18

There are some of us who spend a great deal of our lives trying to avoid conflict, attempting to keep on the good side of our adversaries. There was once a group of golfers who regularly played every Friday morning. Among them was one who had a problem with integrity, often needing to be right and bending the rules in order to win. Having learned his idiosyncrasies, the remaining golfers began to take measures to ensure the game would remain relatively calm and free from squabbles. With precautionary measures in place, one of the golfers hit a drive straight down the middle and longer than his usual distance. Pleased, he strode off after his ball, but found the problem golfer about to hit it. "Pardon me," he said as politely as he could, "but that is my ball." The sneaky golfer insisted, "But this is my ball." The other golfer persisted, "If you pick up that ball, you will see that it has my name on it." The man did just that and haughtily said, "And what is your name doing on my ball?"

Some of us may know such characters. In chapter two of Mark, we encounter for the first time some troublemakers to Jesus' ministry. It all begins in a small village in Galilee, just at the time Jesus was passing through. A crowd has completely filled a house with an even bigger crowd surrounding it and people crammed around every open window and door. I invite you to imagine the scene in your mind as Brian McLaren depicts it. Imagine yourself in the midst of this large group that is trying to see what is going on inside. Whispers are heard around you that there is a rabbi there that everyone wants to hear. The talk is that he is the son of a tradesman from Nazareth who has no credentials or status, no army or weapons, no nobility or wealth. He travels from village to village with a dozen of his friends plus lots of supportive women, teaching deep truths to the peasants. He attracts many who are poor, unemployed, homeless, disabled, uneducated and born the wrong gender. But uneducated is not the same

as stupid – stupid people can't survive in times like these. So you are hungry to learn.

Wherever this rabbi goes, it is like free school for everyone – even women. You ask a woman next to you, she calls herself Mary, Mary of Magdala, you ask her if she thinks this rabbi is starting a new religion. She thinks for a moment and whispers, "I think Rabbi Jesus is doing something far more dangerous than starting a new religion. He says he is announcing a new kingdom." You cautiously ask, "So he is a rebel?" Mary responds, "His kingdom is not like the regimes of this world that take up daggers, swords, and spears. He heals the sick, teaches the unschooled, and inspires the downtrodden with hope. So no, I wouldn't say he is a rebel. And it is not just a revolution, I would call it an uprising, and uprising of learning and hope." We are still cautious, not wanting to get caught in something over our heads, so she continues.

"According to Rabbi Jesus, you can't point to this land or that region and say, 'The kingdom of God is here,' because it exists in us, among us. It doesn't come crashing in like an army but it grows slowly, quietly, under the surface, like the roots of a tree, like yeast in dough, like seeds in soil. Our faith waters the seed and makes it grow. Can you understand that? When people trust it is true, they act upon it, and it becomes reality. Our faith unlocks its potential. Our faith makes it real. You can see why this message is unlike anything people around here have ever heard." "You seem to have a lot of faith," we observe. "Do you ever have doubts, do you just want things to be cut and dried without having to take risks or trusting something so mysterious?" She laughs, "Sometimes I think his message is the crazy dream of poets and artists, the fantasy of children at play, or old men who drink too much. But then I ask, what other message could possibly change the world, usher in an uprising? Perhaps what is truly crazy is what we are doing instead – thinking that a little more hate can conquer hate, a little

more soldiers or bigger weapons, more war will be able to cure war, a little more revenge can end revenge, a little more pride can overcome pride, a little more wealth can cure greed, a little more power will squelch power, or a little more division can create cohesion. That is the approach of fools and the path of destruction.” Mary notices we are deep in thought and she asks, “Or maybe you think like the scribes that are in that house right now looking for ways that the Rabbi is confused or misguided, for ways he is leading others towards half-truths?” We respond that we do want to learn more, we feel our hearts being drawn to him but we really are not fans of trouble, of rocking the boat, or ushering in some form of revolution.

Mary motions us to come closer – there is some commotion going on inside. Word passes back to us that some guys cut open the top of the thatched roof and lowered a paralytic down thru the hole. Rabbi Jesus healed him after saying, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The scribes call this blasphemy for only God can forgive sins. Jesus and the scribes are arguing, and Mary turns to us saying, “Often when Jesus heals someone, he goes beyond just the physical to an emotional and spiritual healing. He understands that carrying guilt and regret can be as paralyzing as any physical ailment. Somehow, the Teacher knew that the lame man needed to find forgiveness as much as he needed to walk. That is what the scribes don’t get. When you change this,” and she points to her head, “and this,” and she points to her heart, “then you can change all of this,” and she pointed to the community gathered around.

The scene is set for conflict and I invite you now to join me back in the 21st century, a place remarkably not so different from 1st century Galilee when it comes to personalities, uprisings, and healing. If we use our imaginations, it is not too hard to envision how the new kid in town with a new way of operating would be received by a church who has always done

things one way and has kept power far away from the average member. It is not too hard to ponder how this uprising would be embraced by a local community suspicious of new, untested approaches and who is bent on maintaining quality of life for the select few rather than the poorest of the poor. It is not too difficult to reflect on how such teachings would be honored by national leaders who place party politics over the pursuit of justice and peace for all people. The conflict still plays out today. There is no denying that Jesus' words and actions pose a threat to the established order of things; he transgresses and subverts the boundaries at every turn, beginning with the healing of the paralytic in the presence of power, in the presence of the scribes.

The aspect that Jesus' opponents lack, which is still present today, is an understanding of what time it is. Jesus begins his ministry in Mark with the proclamation that "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom, the realm of God has come near!" The Greek translation is literally "Time's Up!" The time is up and what Jesus is bringing about in this uprising isn't exactly what he's saying or doing. The Jewish faith has always elevated concern for human need over ritual observance of the law. But Jesus draws on parts of the tradition he thinks are much more in line with what God wants for and from humanity. "Time's up," he says and he accuses his opponents of maintaining the law, the boundaries, the walls that have been erected to keep outsiders out and insiders in, to keep power in place, at the expense of human need. Ironically, those same walls have kept victims from speaking out against sexual harassment, have kept Native Americans from water and land rights taken from them, have allowed the wealthy to get richer while the poor get poorer. The fearful striving for self-preservation which prevents us from crossing boundaries for the sake of others is the conflict at hand, and Mark makes it pretty

clear where he thinks Jesus stands on such issues. Time's up and the ball is in our court as to whether we make it real or not for our own lives.

Mary invites us back to watch that final act in the home without a roof, as Jesus says to the paralytic, "Stand up, take your mat and walk; walk in God's ways." It is an uprising in body, made fully complete by an uprising within the heart and the mind. It sets the tone for Lent and the journey to Easter. "Time's Up!" and the uprising is upon us. How will you rise up to meet the challenge?