

“Misdirection”

[Mark 3:1-6](#)

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

March 10, 2024

Back when I worked at Camp Douglas, I taught myself a couple of very simple magic tricks. I wanted something silly and fun that I could do at the talent show every week that didn't require a lot of time or actual talent – I could just walk up, do my two tricks, and be done. And they are truly unimpressive – it's pretty easy to figure out how they're done if you spend a few seconds thinking about them – but if you add a little bit of showmanship and razzle dazzle, they're good enough to entertain small children for a minute or two. Real magic tricks are much more elaborate; they rely on impressive sleight of hand and misdirection to actually work – good magicians are really good at drawing your attention towards something innocent and simple, waving their hand or their wand over here so you don't pay attention to the card hidden in their sleeve or the coin they've dropped into their lap. Sometimes you'll see videos people have posted online of these really amazing magic tricks, and even though it's a video – even though you can pause and rewind and replay the whole thing in slow motion to analyze every frame of what they're doing – it's still impossible to figure out exactly how they pulled it off, exactly how they made things appear and

disappear. You can watch so carefully, so closely, but that misdirection can still leave you wondering how the trick was done.

We've been working our way through the first few chapters of the gospel of Mark, and we've seen Jesus go from being a nobody to a celebrity. In chapter one, he bursts onto the scene in Galilee, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come near, working wonders, casting out evil, healing the sick. And this ministry has an immediate effect – by the end of chapter one, he's drawing incredible crowds coming to hear him preach and teach with authority, to see the amazing things he's capable of. Word about Jesus was spreading so quickly, he's swarmed everywhere he goes; everyone wants to figure out how Jesus does these amazing things, wants to experience his miraculous power for themselves. And then in chapter two, you start to see a little bit of trouble brewing. First he upsets a few religious teachers when he tells a paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven – because only God can forgive sins. And then he upsets some of the more responsible, respectable society types by going to wild parties with disreputable sinners and scoundrels, even calling them his disciples. And then he upsets some of the local legal experts when his disciples break the rules by picking and eating grain on the Sabbath – and when he gets called on it, Jesus tells them that he's in charge of the Sabbath, he's a King in disguise just like King David. All the way

through chapter two, Jesus is acting like he's the King, like he's God, and with every step, he's starting to gain a few enemies, people who aren't impressed with all his fancy tricks, who are sure he's hiding something, that he's not who he appears to be. So they're watching him. Everywhere he goes, in and among the crowds of curious onlookers and enthusiastic followers, there are always a few people watching to figure out who Jesus really is, what he's really up to, how he's really doing all these impressive, impossible acts of healing and power. They're convinced if they watch long enough, closely enough, eventually Jesus will mess up, eventually they'll see what he's hiding from everyone and they can expose him as the fraud they're sure he really is.

And so when Jesus comes into the synagogue on that Sabbath day, he knows that he's being watched. He knows that his enemies are trying to find a fault, a weak point, anything they can use against him to disrupt his ministry and bring him down. But while they are watching Jesus, Jesus isn't watching them. He isn't paying any attention to them. See, there's a man there in the synagogue with a deformed hand, a disability that must've caused him a great deal of pain and trouble in his life. Maybe he couldn't work for a living without the use of both hands. Maybe he suffered through pain or discomfort or reduced mobility. Maybe he'd experienced rejection or social isolation because of the stigma

around his disability. Jesus sees this man, notices this man, and his enemies notice him too, but when they see him, they are so consumed by their opposition to Jesus that they can only see him in that light. They see him and his disability not as a tragedy, not as a man who has suffered and struggled all his life, someone in need of rescue and help, no, all they see is a trap for Jesus, a chance for their careful watching and plotting to pay off when Jesus breaks the law and heals this man on the Sabbath day. They're so sure that this is their big break, so they're watching him so closely, convinced that Jesus is going to try something sneaky, some misdirection or sleight-of-hand, he's going to sneak this guy into the cloak room and fix him real quick when no-one is watching, so they're being extra careful to make sure Jesus can't get away with it, so they'll see exactly what Jesus does when he makes his move.

And Jesus knows they're watching. He knows that healing this man will cause a scandal, it will give his enemies all the evidence they need to condemn him once and for all. But Jesus doesn't care. He refuses to be distracted by their plotting and scheming, he refuses to see this man only as an obstacle in his way, a trap to be carefully avoided. Instead, Jesus heads right to the front of the room, and calls this man up to come stand beside him, in front of everyone, where everyone can see him, and he asks everyone there to look at this man, and see

him for who he truly is. Not as a tool to be used against your enemies, as bait to lure someone into a trap, a means to an end to be used and disposed of. Jesus calls that synagogue to look at that man and see him the way Jesus sees him – as a child of God who needs help, whose hand needs to be healed, who needs to be rescued, who needs to be saved. And then he looks out at those scheming, pious do-gooders, and he sees them for who they are too – he is angered and saddened by their hard hearts. Just as much as the man standing next to him, they too are children of God whose hearts need to be healed, they need to be rescued, they need to be saved, they just don't know it yet. They are so distracted by their own rules for how things should be done, their own ideas about who Jesus really is, that they can't see the truth that is standing right in front of them. And Jesus isn't going to let their blindness, their hard-heartedness, keep him from doing what God has called him to do. So he heals the man's hand. He breaks the Sabbath law, and his enemies have the excuse they need to head off to the authorities and try to get Jesus killed. For Jesus' enemies, this man and his problems are just a distraction, an opportunity for misdirection and subterfuge, another pawn in their game to bring Jesus down. But Jesus looks at that man, and he looks at his enemies, and he sees them for who they truly are, he sees the burdens they're carrying and the brokenness that plagues them, and he refuses to get distracted,

he refuses to look away from what these people truly, desperately need. Jesus knows that bringing them life, bringing them salvation, healing their broken hands and hardened hearts, that's what it means to be part of the kingdom of heaven, that's the entire purpose of the good news Jesus has been preaching this entire time, that's the reason for the laws protecting the Sabbath, the reason for the Sabbath itself, it's all so that God's children can have life, and life abundantly, so that God's children can find healing and wholeness and mercy and grace, rescue from all the troubles that assail them. That's the reason Jesus is there, that's the purpose for the kingdom, and Jesus isn't going to let anything distract him from that purpose, Jesus isn't going to let anything keep him from openly proclaiming the kingdom of God through his words and his actions, no matter what.

And we need to remember that, as God's children here today, representatives of the kingdom of Jesus Christ here in this world. We have been called to be his hands and his feet, to share his love and grace with the world around us, to go into the world and bring healing and rescue to those with wounded hands and hardened hearts. And doing that work isn't easy. There will be trouble, there will be opposition and there will be days where it feels like the whole world is out to get us and things aren't as easy as they thought they should be. And on those days, it's very tempting to take the easy way out – to turn away

from the opportunities God sends us to proclaim his kingdom, to keep the faith and the truth and the grace God has given to us to ourselves, keep it secret, keep it hidden away lest we call attention to ourselves or make our lives more complicated or uncomfortable. It's so easy to start seeing the people around you as obstacles that get in your way of following God's path, to dismiss the broken people we meet in the world around us as someone else's problem, convince ourselves that we can always help out later when it isn't the Sabbath, when not so many people are watching. And the next thing you know, we're caught up in our own misdirection, putting on this big elaborate show with lots of razzle dazzle and pomp and circumstance, lots of lights and flash and theatre, but we're not helping anyone, we're not serving anyone, we're not actually building the kingdom for anyone except ourselves. And that isn't who we're meant to be. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to see the world the way he sees it, to see the people around us who are hurting and go and help them, go and heal them, go and serve them, no matter what the cost, no matter who's watching. We're called to go to the disreputable sinners and outcasts of our world, to proclaim forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ, to throw caution to the wind and follow Jesus boldly and courageously each and every day, to stand in front of everyone and love as we have been loved by Jesus Christ, no matter the cost, no

matter who's watching. And we do this because this is what Jesus did for us.

When we were suffering, when we were lost, when our hearts were hardened by sin and pride, Jesus Christ came to us and held out his hand, and we were healed, we were restored, we were made whole. And now we can go and do the same.

The kingdom of heaven is here, God's love is here, God's grace and forgiveness are here for the taking, and nothing can stop that love from moving in this world.

Nothing can stop that kingdom from taking root here. Today and everyday, may we proclaim the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ in all we say and do, may we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, seeing him in the faces of the least of our brothers and sisters we meet here in this world, may we love no matter what the cost, no matter who's watching, so the world will know what Jesus Christ has done for us, what Jesus Christ can do for them. In the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen!