

## Wisdom of the Rabbis (including Jesus)

Today's Gospel reading from Mark is the famous story of Jesus saying that "No prophet is without honor except among his relatives or in his hometown". It is a statement born of irony and frustration when Jesus was not accepted among the people who knew him best, presumably from the time he was very young. It is an interesting story in that it tells us about Jesus' family...his mother Mary, 4 younger brothers and at least two younger sisters. There is no mention of his father Joseph who may very well have died by the time of the story. It reveals that people knew he was a carpenter. And the exclamation of surprise by his family and friends may indicate his history and personality until that point were unremarkable, but now featuring wisdom, knowledge and the ability to perform miracles.

There has been a trick question circulating on the internet..."Is Jesus a Christian?" What do you think? Here is one response from a theologian:

*Jesus was not a Christian; He was a Jewish rabbi. He did not come to Earth to form a new religion. Jesus*

*followed the Jewish law God had given to Moses (Matthew 5:17–18). He lived perfectly under the law in order to present Himself as a sacrifice without blemish, acceptable under that law (Leviticus 9:3; 1 Peter 1:18–19; Hebrews 9:13–14). Christianity is the culmination of God’s plan, the completion of what God instigated when He set apart the Hebrew people for Himself (Deuteronomy 7:6–8). For centuries God had promised that He would send His Messiah to rescue His people and reign over them forever. The coming of Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise.*

In fact, the word “Christian” was not used until well after his death and resurrection. It was originally a pejorative term, meant as an insult. It means “little Christs”, and in fact that is what we strive to be in following Jesus.

What I want to focus on in today’s message is a certain wisdom and ministry exhibited by 3 eras of Rabbis spanning over 2500 years of history. The first is a group of long-forgotten Rabbis who lived during the second to fifth centuries BC. Their story is told in a third century AD Jewish Text called the Mishnah, written by yet another set of unknown ancient Rabbis.

The second Rabbi is Jesus himself, as revealed in today's Gospel from Mark..but considering the positive aspects of the story rather than the frustration. And the third is Rabbi Sharon Brous who in our time leads a progressive Jewish congregation in Los Angeles. The common belief and practice of shared humanity that all 3 of these rabbis exhibit has been important across the vastness of two and a half millennia and are particularly relevant in our own 21st century existence.

So let's begin with the first group, the Rabbis who lived during what is known as the Second Temple Period, a few centuries before Jesus was born. Their timeless wisdom is buried deep within the Mishnah, a Jewish legal compendium from around the third century. It is an ancient practice reflecting a deep understanding of the human psyche and spirit: When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the community.

The text, [Middot 2:2](#), describes a pilgrimage ritual from the time of the Second Temple. Several times each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would ascend to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious and political

life. They would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right en masse, circling counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners (and here I would also include the lonely and the sick), would make this same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current.

And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into their eyes and inquire: “What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?”

“My father died,” a person might say. “There are so many things I never got to say to him.” Or perhaps: “My partner left. I was completely blindsided.” Or: “My child is sick. We’re hoping the doctors can help.”

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing: “May the Holy One comfort you,” they would say. “You are not alone.” And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

This is what it means to be human in a world of pain. This year, you walk the path of the anguished. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine.

Several hundred years later, our Lord and Savior, the Rabbi Jesus, did exactly the same thing in a slightly different way. Jesus was addressed as “Rabbi” in his own time, which means “teacher”. Jesus went out to where the people lived...home to home, gathering to gathering. Yes, he also preached in Synagogues, but his ministry was not in a building. He went directly to the gatherings, homes and crowds of struggling people. People who lost a loved one, who were sick or had dangerously sick relatives, who were lonely or outcast. He told them the same message of love...”May God comfort you”...”You are not alone”...”I share your grief, am with you, and will heal you”.

Despite Jesus’ frustration in today’s Gospel, he still goes out to heal the sick and cast out the demons of pain, loneliness, fear and death.

And now, in 2020, Rabbi Sharon Brous wrote the following about going out to where people are in pain and hurting:

“It is an expression of both love and sacred responsibility to turn to another person in their moment of deepest anguish and say: Your sorrow may scare

me, it may unsettle me. But I will not abandon you. I will meet your grief with relentless love.

We cannot magically fix one another's broken hearts. But we can find each other in our most vulnerable moments and wrap each other up in a circle of care. We can humbly promise each other: I can't take your pain away, but I can promise you won't have to hold it alone.

Showing up for one another doesn't require heroic gestures. It means training ourselves to approach, even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and to the house of mourning. It also means going to the wedding and to the birthday dinner. Reach out in your strength, step forward in your vulnerability. Err on the side of presence.

Small, tender gestures remind us that we are not helpless, even in the face of grave human suffering. We maintain the ability, even in the dark of night, to find our way to one another. We need this, especially now.”

Jesus showed up. He showed up at weddings, funerals, sick beds, dinner with friends, at the

synagogue and ultimately for his own sacrificial death and resurrection. He is there for us, both then, and now.

Here's another lesson from the ancient Mishnah. On pilgrimage, those who enter the sacred circle and turn left when nearly everyone else turns right are grieving or unwell. But the text offers that there is another who turns to the left: the person sentenced to ostracization — in Hebrew, the *menudeh*.

Ostracization was a punishment used sparingly in ancient times. It only applied to people who were believed to have brought serious harm to the social fabric of the community. The ostracized were essentially temporarily excommunicated. They had to distance themselves from their colleagues and loved ones, they were not counted in a prayer quorum and they were prohibited from engaging in most social interactions. And incredibly, they, too, entered the sacred space, where they, too, were asked: Tell me, what happened to you? What's your story? And they, too, were blessed.

This is breathtaking. The ancient rabbis, including Jesus, ask us to imagine a society in which no person

is disposable. Even those who have hurt us, even those with views antithetical to ours must be seen in their humanity and held with concern and care.

In conclusion, we desperately need a spiritual rewiring in our time. Imagine a society in which we learn to see one another in our pain, to ask one another: What happened to you? Imagine that we hear one another's stories, say amen to one another's pain, and even pray for one another's healing. This is the world we need now. We need to appreciate the love and care exhibited by Rabbis both old, and new, and to follow the example of our own Savior and Rabbi... Jesus.

Amen