

# “Oral Tradition and Communion”

Mark 6:30-34

7/2/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

We know Jesus’ disciples were not following Him around with notepads, tape recorders or mini-cams, recording everything He said and did as it happened. We are sometimes vague, however, about how all these stories and teachings were collected into what we call the gospels.

On a timeline, Jesus died and was resurrected somewhere around 32 or 33 C.E. In the ensuing ten or fifteen years the church grew, spreading throughout the Mediterranean region. During this time, there was no “New Testament” and almost nothing written down that was circulating among the churches that had started up. Imagine that: going to a Christian church without (what we call) a “New Testament” having been written. This Fall, we’ll see more of the problems that arose in the early church when we spend several weeks with Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian house church.

During this time after Jesus’ departure and before the writing of the New Testament documents, each church had their own leaders called Elders and Deacons. The average worship service for a house church, such as the one in Ephesus, would begin with an Elder standing up and reading out of the Old Testament. Next, another leader would comment on the passage, giving an interpretation of how that passage might relate to their lives at that time in the first century.

Following that might be singing (without the benefit of musical instruments). This would be followed by a time of sharing about the needs of the community. Based on those needs, a leader would pray.

An Elder or perhaps a visiting Apostle, or someone who had heard the preaching of an apostle, would stand up and tell stories about the life of Jesus. They would observe communion in the context of a meal, closing with a song.

By this point, no one had taken the time to write a biography of Jesus because most everyone was well-familiar with the orally-circulated stories of His

life. Most every church leader fully expected Jesus to return soon. After all, Jesus had said that this is the end times and He would return unexpectedly – as surprisingly as “a thief in the night.”

Well, Jesus didn’t return as expected. The first New Testament writings were not the gospels but actually letters of Paul to struggling start-up churches.

Emperor Nero began a persecution of Christians in Rome around 65 C.E. There was also a civil war going on in Palestine between the Jews and the governing Romans. It wasn’t until the sixties when Mark decided to write a long sermon that summed up the entire life of Jesus. Mark, the first gospel written in the 60’s, was probably written in the city of Rome when the persecution was underway.<sup>1</sup>

Matthew and Luke, independently, had copies of Mark’s gospel on their desks. Both of those writers also had another written gospel about Jesus (of which we do not have a copy today). This gospel is nicknamed “Q” by Biblical Scholars.

With Mark’s long sermon and the “Q” gospel in hand, Matthew then Luke (several years later) wrote their accounts. Matthew was writing to Jewish Christians while Luke wrote to Gentile Converts to the faith. At or beyond the 90’s of the first century, John wrote a very different and theological version of the life of Jesus.

But let’s go back to the time, early in the life of the church, just before these oral traditions were written down by Mark. This was the time when all that was in print were a few loosely circulating letters of Paul to the start-up congregations.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This accounts for Mark’s hurried writing style, characterized by frequent uses of “and immediately” and other similar segways to other stories and events in the life of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> The New Testament books were not placed in order of the time of their writing but in the order they were believed to be most credible and authentic (in their acceptance in the cannon of sacred scriptures) by the early church leaders in the first 4 centuries. Too bad the modern publishers don’t let us know that. The oldest NT writings were written in the 50’s of the first

In Mark's gospel, he transcribes two collections of oral tradition about Jesus. That is, he included two sets of stories people had memorized and we can see they are units by their structure. One of these sets of stories would be recited in a communion meal.

One section begins at Mark 4:35 and the other at 6:45. They both have similar elements.

Each section begins with a miracle story about Jesus (that happened near a body of water. Next, there is mention of Jesus preaching to the crowds. There are three healings and finally, each section ends with Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people.

The point, so far, is that at a typical 1<sup>st</sup> century worship service, someone would stand up and tell, by memory, one of these collections of stories about Jesus just before their eucharistic celebration of Holy Communion. What I'd like to do for you is recreate what it would have been like for one of these early congregations to hear someone tell one of these sets of stories (that Mark included later in his gospel).

"Friends, one day Jesus was saying to His disciples, we ought to go across to the other side of the lake. So they left the crowd of people (that had been listening to His teachings) and got into their boats.

When they were a ways out on the lake, suddenly, one of those typical Lake Galilee storms blew up and the waves were even coming into the boat. I'll tell ya, even those veteran fishermen were struggling, . . . trying to keep the water out of the boat so they could make it back to the shore.

While all this was going on, Jesus was fast asleep under the raised platform at the rear of the boat. They were having such a hard time in the storm that one of them yelled back to Him, "Wake up, the boat's going down - we're gonna' drown!"

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century and they include Paul's letters to Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans. In the sixties, Colossians (if by Paul), Philippians, and then Philemon. Mark, the oldest gospel, was written between 66-70. Matthew: 80-85; Luke & Acts 85-95, then Hebrews, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, Ephesians, James, the Gospel of John, Revelation, Letters of John, 1<sup>st</sup> and after the turn of the century: 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, Titus, Jude then 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. (See James Harris, p.11 ISBN 0-7674-0014-3.

Most of them were too frenzied to notice what Jesus was doing but amazingly Jesus stood up and as He held on to the mast of the ship (to keep Himself upright), He yelled out "Be still!" As quickly as the others turned around to face Jesus, the storm stopped – the wind and the rain stopped just like that. The water was calm and the boat stopped rocking.

Jesus next calmly said, with a grin on His face, "Why are you all shook up – did you forget Who's in control of all this – where's your faith?"

Nobody said a word, all the way to the other side of the lake. They were all frightened. One of them mumbled to another, "Who is He anyway, that even the wind and waves obey Him?"

On the other side of the lake in Gerasa county, Jesus got out of the boat and up rushed a man. He was a rough, frightening looking character. He came out of the burial caves and tombs and had an evil spirit controlling him. He actually lived down there in the "Valley of the Tombs."

The local militia couldn't even keep him tied up – not even with the help of the Roman forces who tried to use their metal manacles. He was always able to break through the irons. Day and night, he'd run through the hills, screaming and cutting himself with stones. As crazy as he was, they would have shot him with arrows if he had endangered others but he was mostly self-destructive and just scared everyone to death.

Well, this fellow came running toward Jesus and all of a sudden, he fell down on his knees (in front of Him on the beach) and screamed, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God, what do You want with me, for God's sake, I beg You, don't punish me." He said this because Jesus was telling the demon to release the man.

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

From the man's mouth came, "My name is mob – there are so many of us." And the voice kept asking Jesus not to sent it out of that region.

Well, nearby, there was a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside, so the voice in the man begged to go into the pigs. As soon as Jesus granted it, the spirits

went out of the man into the pigs – the whole herd – about 2,000 in all. All the pigs ran down the side of the hill and into the lake and drowned.

The herders of the pigs ran away, back into the town. They told everyone about what happened and the whole village turned out to see what it was. They all came out to see Jesus and the man (of whom they had long been terrified). They were amazed to see him in his right mind. There wasn't a person there who wasn't profoundly in awe of what had happened. Some of the locals were so frightened and confused that they asked Jesus to leave the county.

Jesus did leave, you know, but as He was getting into the boat, the healed man said, "let me come with you."

Jesus wouldn't let him but said, instead, "Go on back home to your family. Tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how God has been kind to you." So he went home and that man went around to all ten of the nearby villages telling everyone about what Jesus had done. Of course, everyone who heard it was amazed.

When Jesus got back to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around Him and this time Jairus, the President of the local synagogue, came up to Him. He came up to Jesus and knelt down, at His feet, and begged Him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is gravely ill. Please come and touch her so she'll get well. My wife and I are heartsick. She's dying.

Jesus quickly started off with him but a large crowd was following, filling the width of the street.

In that crowd was a woman who had suffered terribly from severe bleeding for twelve years. She had gone to every doctor in the area, spending her life's savings yet she never improved. She had heard about Jesus.

The woman was socially timid. You know how it isn't proper for a woman to approach a man on the street, . . . yet there were all these people around. She thought to herself, "Maybe if I just touch His cloak, I'll get well." So she touched the end of his cloak from behind and immediately she realized her bleeding had stopped. She was cured.

At the same time, Jesus knew that someone had benefited from His power, so He stopped walking. As He stopped, the crowd around Him did as well. Jesus said, "Who is it who touched me?" as He looked around.

Of course the disciples said, "What's the matter, . . . there are so many people around us that we're lucky we can get through here in the first place?" But as Jesus was looking, the woman realized He knew it was her and confessed.

Shaking like a leaf, she admitted it was her. But Jesus put His hand on her shoulder and said, "Daughter, you are well because of your faith. Go in peace, healed of your trouble."

As Jesus was saying this, some servants of Jairus' household came running up and said that his daughter had died. They added, "It's no use even getting Jesus to come at this point."

Jairus wailed and threw himself on the ground.

Jesus quickly got him up and quietly said, "Don't be afraid, . . . just believe. Trust Me."

When they arrived at his home, Jesus told everyone, except the parents, to stay out of the house. Peter, James and John went in with Jairus and Jesus. The whole family was grief-stricken.

Jesus quietly said, "Try to settle down. You don't have to cry. The child isn't dead but sleeping."

Some of the relatives started to jeer at Jesus, asking what sort of sick joke this could be. Jesus put them all out of the house and took the three disciples and the parents back into the girl's bedroom.

He went over to the bed and said, "Little girl, . . . I want you to get up now."

Amazingly, color came back to her face, her eyes opened and Jesus helped her sit up in bed. The little twelve-year-old girl got up and could walk. She went right to her mother. They were all so amazed that all some of them could do was weep. Strangely, though, Jesus told them not to tell others what He had done. On His way out, He said "Give her something to eat!"

Jesus had gotten quite popular in that area. The disciples came back one day, telling of even more

people approaching. So Jesus said to them, “Let’s go off by ourselves, . . . somewhere quiet, and rest.” They started off in a boat, down an inlet, but some people watched and knew where they were going and spread the word.

So people from all the nearby towns ran ahead, by land, and when they landed, there was an immense crowd. As tired as He was, Jesus looked at them and felt pity for them all. They were like sheep without a shepherd, so He began to teach them many things.

Later on, when it was getting late, the disciples said to Him, “You know, it is getting dark and this place is fairly isolated. Maybe we should send the people out to nearby farms to get food. In fact, do You want us to go to nearby farms and get food? Should we go and spend all the money there is to feed all these people?”

Jesus asked, “How much bread do you have, go and look.” When they returned, they said they had only five loaves and two fish between them.

Right then, Jesus told the disciples to organize the crowd, having them sit into groups on the grass. To put them into sections of fifty or a hundred.

Then Jesus took the few loaves and fish, looked upward, and thanked God for the food. He broke up the loaves up and divided the fish, passing them out to the disciples for distribution to the crowd.

In the end, the disciples took up twelve baskets of left-over fish and bread. There were well over 5,000 people in that place.

You know, these stories of our Lord that we all know so well, thrill our hearts. All of us eagerly look forward to seeing Jesus again. We know that this same Lord, Who heals our bodies and souls, gives us spiritual food – just as He provided those people in that rural place with food. So as we focus on Jesus’ giving of Himself for us, let us remember His love for us in our observance of Holy Communion. We invite all of you to join in this, regardless of your church membership or affiliation, . . . for we are all one in Christ.

