

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm. *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 312 pages, \$24.95.

Reading this commentary makes me eager for Lectionary Year A to begin. The exegetical sections, “Exploring the Text,” draw me into the details while maintaining a sense of direction for where they are leading. The sections entitled “Preaching and Teaching the Word” are rich and perceptive in insights and questions the text raises for 21st century Christians.

We take for an example Wilhelm’s treatment of Mark 7. This is a difficult chapter in Mark. In portraying the Pharisees as the objects of Jesus’ criticism, it is difficult for Christians to hear his criticism directed against ourselves, especially when the words of condemnation are so strong (“hypocrites,” who “abandon the commandment of God and seize upon human traditions”), and when the specific practices Jesus criticizes are Jewish (Corban and washing as a religious ritual), not Christian. By entitling her comments on Mark 7, “The Heart of Holiness,” Wilhelm names the underlying issue, articulating Jesus’ understanding of holiness as “not a matter of ritual purity, of distancing oneself from objects, foods, or persons believed to be unclean. It is a matter of the will to love God and neighbor” (125). In “Preaching and Teaching the Word,” Wilhelm directs us to identify our own vocabulary for the actions and attitudes we embrace as Christians and that parallel the actions and attitudes the Pharisees named with terms foreign to our religious usage, such as “cleanliness,” “defiled,” and “tradition of the elders.” She warns us against confusing the narrative function of the Pharisees in Mark’s story with the historical role they played as vital and imaginative religious leaders who were concerned to promote holiness in every area of life. She names Jesus’ role as in the tradition of the prophets challenging God’s people of every age to ask questions about our own religious practices, recognizing how easy it is to lose our focus on God’s mercy, love, and justice. Indeed, we even honor God with our lips while our hearts are far from God, as when we “sing praise to the Prince of Peace yet respond violently to enemies” (127).

Wilhelm’s commentary in this way brings out abiding questions about our life with God, articulated in the language of a different religious culture and susceptible of translation into that of our own. It is left to the preacher to lead the congregation in this work of translation in a way that is pastorally sensitive, leading from confession through repentance and forgiveness to new life.

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