everyone despairs. By raising her Jesus reveals that he has divine power for only God can give life to the dead.

Questions for Reflection:

Do small miracles (or even big ones) happen frequently, but people are afraid to disclose them? If so, what is the source of this fear? It is always a good idea to tell people about a miracle?

18. Mark 6:1–6a

And he went away from there and came into his hometown, and his students followed him. And when it was the Sabbath, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished and said, “Where did he get this from, and what is the wisdom which has been given to him? And such miracles happen at his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Jude and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they were scandalized at him. And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not dishonored, except in his hometown and among his kin and in his house.” And he could not do any miracle there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick and healed them. And he marveled because of their lack of faith (6:1–6a).

This section borders on being inconsistent. Mark first emphasizes that Jesus could not do any miracle. But then he adds that Jesus did in fact heal some sick people.

I suspect this tension arose when Mark edited an earlier tradition. That tradition reported that Jesus went to his hometown, healed some sick people, but nevertheless got a cool
reception. His relatives and childhood friends could not believe he was anyone special.

Mark reshaped the material so that it would be consistent with his theme that Jesus did not work miracles to impress skeptics. Mark played down the miracles that Jesus did work by saying that he healed only a few. Instead, Mark emphasized that the lack of faith made it impossible for Jesus to do wonders.

Thanks to the reshaping, this brief section makes explicit the point that the previous section implied. Earlier we saw that the interlocking stories of the hemorrhaging woman and the raising of Jairus’s daughter clearly imply that Jesus works public miracles in response to faith, but refuses to work miracles to produce it. Now in the following section, Mark explicitly states that Jesus could not work miracles due to the lack of faith which the people of Nazareth displayed.

The passage also introduces a new and disturbing theme, namely that lack of faith undermines Jesus’ own power. Earlier in the gospel, lack of faith does not diminish Jesus’ ability to do wonders. It merely makes him try to keep them from coming to public attention. Mark will return later to the theme that unbelief reduces Jesus’ capacity to work miracles.

The section reinforces the point that Jesus’ students are his true family. Earlier, his natural mother and siblings tried to seize him, and Jesus declared that those who do God’s will are his true mother and brothers and sisters (3:20–35). Now we read that Jesus had no honor “in his hometown and among his kin and in his house.” Significantly, in the following verses Jesus shares his authority and mission with the twelve.

Questions for Reflection:

If it is God who performs miracles, why does lack of faith make them more difficult? Why do we notice prophets and saints who are far away much more easily than prophets
and saints who arise from our own midst? Does the particular community in which I live have any?

19. Mark 6:6b–30

And he went about among the villages teaching. And he summoned the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and he gave them authority over unclean spirits, and he directed them to take nothing on the road, except a walking stick only, no bread, no knapsack, no copper coins in their belt. But they were to wear sandals. “And do not put on two sets of clothes!” And he said to them, “Whenever you go into a house, remain there until you leave from there. And whatever place does not receive you and does not listen to you, when you go out from there, shake off the dust from the bottom of your feet for a testimony to them.” And they went out and proclaimed that people should repent, and they drove out many demons, and anointed with oil many sick and healed them (6:6b–13).

And King Herod heard of it for his name became known, and people were saying that John the Baptizer had been raised from the dead and that was the reason these powers were at work in him. And others were saying that it was Elijah. And still others were saying that it was a prophet like one of the prophets of old. But Herod when he heard was saying, “John whom I beheaded has been raised.” For Herod himself had sent and seized John and put him bound in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod married her, for John was saying to Herod, “It is not allowed for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had it in for him and wanted to kill him; yet she could not for Herod was afraid of John, since he knew he was a righteous and holy man. And he protected him. And when he listened to him, he was utterly at a loss, yet he listened to him gladly. And after an
opportune day arrived, when Herod for his birthday festivities gave a banquet for his courtiers and generals and the leaders of Galilee, his daughter by Herodias came in and danced and pleased Herod and those who were dining with him. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want, and I will give it to you." And he swore to her vehemently, "Whatever at all you ask me, I will give to you up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!" And she at once went in with haste to the king and asked, "I want you immediately to give me on a plate the head of John the Baptist." And although the king was greatly grieved, he did not want to refuse her because of the oaths and those who were dining. And at once the king sent out an executioner with the order to bring his head. And he went away and beheaded him in prison and brought his head on a plate and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. And when his students heard, they came and took away his corpse and put it in a tomb (6:14–29).

And the missionaries gathered by Jesus and reported to him all they had done and all they had taught (6:30).

Here again, Mark has sandwiched together two independent stories. In the oral tradition, the stories of the mission of the twelve and of the execution of John the Baptist were surely told separately, since in every respect they differ. Yet, Mark has combined them.

By juxtaposing these stories, Mark is inviting us to compare two different kinds of discipleship. First, we have the discipleship of the twelve, which consists of voluntary poverty, preaching repentance, and working miracles. Then, we have the discipleship of John, which consists of suffering imprisonment and grisly death.

Mark suggests that the first kind of discipleship is a genuine expression of faith in Jesus. In the immediately preceding story the people of Nazareth have no faith, and Jesus cannot work miracles. Now the disciples are able to heal the sick.
quently, Jesus is able to send them on a mission, and that mission expresses their genuine trust in him.

The second kind of discipleship, however, involves a much deeper identification with Jesus. The narrative suggests that thanks to his sufferings, John is the very image of Jesus. Indeed, in the story, Herod declares that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Of course, John’s execution by Herod foreshadows Jesus’ crucifixion by Pilate. Later Jesus too will be “seized” (14:46) and “bound” (15:1). Other passages in the gospel also make John’s teaching and suffering a symbol for those of Jesus himself (e.g., 9:11-13).

This section taken as a whole continues Mark’s theme that the twelve already have a special relationship to Jesus, but still have to learn that they must suffer. Like Jesus, they preach and heal, but unlike Jesus and John they are not yet ready to die.

Because the disciples have not learned they must suffer, it is not yet time to preach the good news to the world. Therefore, when they go out, they do not proclaim that Jesus is Lord or even that God’s rule has come. Instead, they preach only that “people should repent.” As Mark’s treatment of the Parable of the Sower suggested, it is still the period of preparation.

Questions for Reflection:

Do many people who have a genuine relationship with Jesus still have to learn that they must suffer with him? When such people talk about Christianity, what can they convincingly proclaim? What are they not able to proclaim until they have suffered?
And he said to them, “You come by yourselves into an uninhabited place and rest a little.” For many were coming and going, and they did not even have an opportunity to eat. And they went away in the boat to an uninhabited place by themselves. Yet many saw them going off and recognized them. And by land from all the cities they ran together there, and they arrived before them. And when he got out, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep which do not have a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things. And when the hour had already become late, his students came to him and said, “This is an uninhabited place and the hour already late. Send them away that they may go away into the surrounding fields and villages and buy for themselves something they can eat.” But in reply he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go away and buy two hundred days’ wages of bread and give them to eat?” But he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go off, see.” And when they knew, they said, “Five, and two fish.” And he ordered them to seat everyone group by group on the green grass. And they got down section by section, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up into heaven and blessed and broke up the loaves and kept giving them to his students, so they might set them before them, and he distributed the two fish to all. And all ate and were filled. And they took up twelve wicker baskets full of crumbs and of pieces of fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men (6:31-44).

And at once he made his students get into the boat and go ahead across to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd himself. And after saying farewell to them, he went off to the mountain to pray. And when it had become evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and he alone on the land. And after he saw they were distressed in rowing for the wind was against them, about the fourth watch of the night he came to them walking on the sea, and he intended to pass by them. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought that it was a ghost, and they cried out. For
they all saw him and were alarmed. But at once he spoke with them and said to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” And he came up to them into the boat, and the wind stopped, and they were utterly beside themselves, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their mind was closed (6:45-52).

Mark explicitly tells the reader that these two stories should be seen together because they make the same point. The end of the second story, “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their mind was closed,” refers back to the first and suggests that Jesus’ students have twice failed to grasp the point. Accordingly, Mark challenges the reader to perceive the truth that eludes the disciples.

The point that the disciples fail to grasp is a teaching which should now be familiar to the reader, namely the disciples should trust Jesus because he exercises the very power of God. Thus, in both stories Jesus exercises divine prerogatives. In the first story, Jesus gives the people bread in the wilderness, and so this miracle recalls God giving the people of Israel manna in the desert (e.g., Exod 16:14-15). In the second story, Jesus walks on water, and in the Hebrew Scriptures, God alone walks on the waters (Job 9:8, 38:16). Lest we miss the point, Mark gives us other signs of Jesus’ divinity. The story tells us that Jesus meant to “pass by,” and in theophanies in the Hebrew Scriptures God reveals himself while passing by (Exod 33:18-23, 1 Kgs 19:11). Then, when the disciples become fearful in the presence of divine power, Jesus declares, “It is I.” In Greek, these words are literally, “I am,” and they recall the scene in Exodus 3 when Moses asks God what his name is, and God replies, “I am who I am” (Exod 3:14).

In both stories, Jesus also challenges his students to persevere in seemingly hopeless situations. In the first narrative, when the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowd away to buy food, he challenges them to give the people something to eat. When they object that two hundred days’ wages of bread would be necessary, he forces them to see that they have only five loaves
and two fish. He tells them to seat the crowd. Only at this point does he multiply the bread and fish so that the disciples can feed everyone. In the second narrative, Jesus again sends the disciples into a difficult situation. He makes “his students get into the boat and go ahead” without him. When they reach the middle of the lake, they are stymied because the wind is against them. Even though they are straining at the oars, they go nowhere. Apparently, Jesus intends to test them further, because he means to “pass by” rather than end their difficulties.

Accordingly, these stories continue the themes which first come up in the account of the stilling of the storm (4:35–41). There, too, Jesus challenges the disciples to persevere and reveals his divine power. When the storm is sinking the boat, he is asleep. When they panic and awake him, he reveals his divine power by calming the elements. In that story, too, the disciples fail to understand. Mark’s readers need to do better.

We may note that, as we would expect, Jesus works these two miracles in private because there is no prior faith and they would lead to public acclaim if they became known. Thus, as soon as he feeds the crowds, Jesus makes the disciples leave and sends the crowds away. Such measures are necessary to keep the multitude from discovering that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish. So too, when Jesus walks on water, only his students are present to see.

The two miracles, also introduce a major new theme, namely that miracles do not produce genuine faith. After they saw Jesus feed five thousand men with five loaves of bread, the disciples might reasonably have concluded that Jesus could do anything. However, immediately thereafter when they see Jesus walking on water and exercising control over the wind, his students “were utterly beside themselves.” The point is evident: Even though faith produces miracles, miracles do not produce faith. As we shall see, this theme will keep recurring right through to the crucifixion.
Questions for Reflection:

Does Jesus sometimes call us to persevere in seemingly hopeless situations? How can we distinguish this call from mere wishful thinking that tells us that everything will always turn out all right? What kind of faith do miracles inspire? Is such faith enough?


And crossing over to the land, they came to Gennesaret and beached. And as they were coming out of the boat, at once people recognized him, and they ran around that whole district and began to bring around on cots those who were sick where they heard that he was. And wherever he went into villages or into cities or into the countryside, they would put those who were infirm in the marketplaces and beg him that they might touch even the edge of his garment, and all who touched him were saved (6:53–56).

In this brief section Mark emphasizes that Jesus worked many public miracles. The crowds lay large numbers of infirm people in the marketplaces, and Jesus heals them all.

Jesus performs these public miracles in response to persistent faith. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus sees the faith of the four men who lug the paralytic on a cot up onto the roof (2:3–5), and Jesus commends the faith of the woman with the hemorrhage who wishes to touch just his clothes (5:25–34, especially vs. 28). If anything, the people in this passage have an even greater faith. They lug “around on cots those who were sick where they heard that he was,” and beg to “touch even the edge of his garment”—such is their persistence in seeking him out and following him, and their confidence in his power.
Questions for Reflection:

Do people who have faith seek for miracles in a different way from people who lack it? What are the differences and are they important?

22. Mark 7:1–30

And the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered by him. And they saw that some of his students were eating bread with defiled hands, (that is unwashed)—for Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands to the wrist, since they keep the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash, and there are many other things which they accept and keep, the washing of cups and pitchers and kettles—and the Pharisees and scribes asked him, “Why don’t your students walk in accordance with the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with defiled hands?” But he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. In vain they worship me, since they teach human commandments.’ Forsaking God’s commandment, you hold on to human tradition.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting God’s commandment to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother shall surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a person says to father or mother, “Corban” (that is, whatever you would have profited from me is a “gift”), you no longer let them do anything for father or mother. You invalidate God’s word by your tradition which you hand on; and you do many such similar things!” (7:1–13).