
Mark's Passion Narrative as Political Theology

Jan Schnell Rippentrop

Founder, reHEALTH, Iowa City, Iowa

Mark's Passion Narrative reveals a political theology of Christian resistance and resilience in the face of political ineptitude and coercion. After defining political theology and describing how the Passion Narrative functions as political theology, the second half of the essay claims that

- 1A. resistance can be a positive practice exemplified by Jesus and the disciples in the Passion Narrative,
- 1B. resistance can be a positive practice for Christians within today's politic,
- 2A. resilience is a positive practice exemplified by Jesus and the disciples in the Passion Narrative, and
- 2B. resilience is a positive practice for Christians within today's politic.

Defining political theology

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines political theology as “theology which relates to the social, economic, and political orders, sometimes endorsing and justifying, sometimes challenging them, and sometimes shaping them.” While this definition is not untrue, it misses the main thrust of political theology, as understood in this article. Political theology is generated by the word of God, which is inherently political. The Bible is contextualized in and speaks directly to various political systems. For example, within Mark's Passion Narrative, the high priest passed Jesus over to Pilate, under whose authority he was dressed in a purple cloak, donned with a crown, and crucified under the inscription “The King of the Jews.” Jesus' crucifixion (and resurrection) occurs within political systems and confronts those political systems. Mark's Passion Narrative is not neutral regarding politics; rather, as we will explore below, it criticizes political systems that defy God's movement in the world.

The “political” in political theology cannot be constricted to a narrow definition of politics, such as “the art or science of government” especially as “concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy” or “concerned with winning and holding control.” This definition of politics deals narrowly with governmental policies and control, but the word “politics” signifies more than this. Political theology relies on the following broader definition of politics: “*the total complex of relations between people living in society.*”

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Politics refers to the making and remaking of all relationships within society. Political theology moves beyond that which is narrowly governmental or partisan and includes all that affects the polis—a city or interdependent group of people characterized by a sense of community.

The “separation of church and state” is a controlling trope in the United States and can cause one to question whether it is faithful to be both political and Christian. Questioning one's ability to be both political and Christian arises from a misunderstanding of the principle of separation of church and state—a misunderstanding that has led many churches to not weigh in on political issues, which is an inaccurate reading of the principle for at least one obvious and one historic reason. It is obvious that, given the broad definition of politics above, institutions in a society exist in a web of political relationships. Historically, separation of church and state limited the state's ability to determine religious practices. Separation of church and state did not limit the ability of churches to comment politically, which, as indicated above and more fully described below, has consistently been a faithful practice of religions as evidenced in Mark's Passion Narrative.

This deliverance from domination frees one from the dehumanizing weight of oppressive regimes. In the Passion Narrative, Mark shows Jesus' political purposes of subverting unjust rulers and liberating the oppressed.

Mark's Passion Narrative as political theology

Mark's Passion Narrative participates in political theology: It uses political purposes, settings, characters, and events to make theological points; and its theological claims about Jesus make political points.

Political purposes

Mark shows Jesus as a leader with political purposes: subversion of unjust systems and liberation from them. A theological claim drives Jesus' political purposes: unjust political systems oppose God's will and necessitate subversion in order to liberate creation.

Jesus' widespread and quickly expanding movement intimidated political leaders and subverted unjust political systems. "Such a widespread movement would understandably be threatening to the established rulers even if it did not directly challenge them. In several episodes, however, Mark also presents Jesus' actions or pronouncements as a direct alternative or challenge to the ruling institutions, rulers, or their interests and procedures." In the opening of Mark's Passion Narrative (14:1–2), it is clear that Jesus' movement is a direct challenge to the institution headed by the chief priests and scribes, who sought to silence Jesus without inciting a riot. Jesus' mission had impacted the community in a way that threatened the chief priests and scribes to the point that they "were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him" (14:1). Jesus was not only a threat to the establishment, he also subverted the unjust systems they struggled to maintain. In his previous critique of the scribes, Jesus had offered a scathing analysis: "[They] have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers" (12:39–40). Jesus subverted the scribes' authority by calling out their misuse of power and offering an alternate vision of leadership: proclamation of God's power over death, presence within deathly situations, and liberation from the forces of death. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann names Jesus' action as "subversive" because his action "dethrones, delegitimizes, and dismisses old sovereignties that are now discredited and defeated. Easter means the dismissal of Pharaoh, Caesar, and all imperial power." Jesus' movement from the periphery to the center of Jerusalem, and then to Golgotha subverted unjust political systems for the purpose of delivering communities from the forces of death.

Jesus subverts unjust political systems in order to achieve liberation for God's people. Jesus does not subvert for the purpose of destabilization; Jesus subverts for the purpose of liberation. Richard Horsley says that in Mark, "Jesus is leading a new exodus, that is, a liberation for the people of Israel from foreign domination, just as Moses had led the liberation from bondage in Egypt." This deliverance from domination frees one from the dehumanizing weight of oppressive regimes. In the Passion Narrative, Mark shows Jesus' political purposes of subverting unjust rulers and liberating the oppressed.

Political settings

Jesus transgressed political boundaries throughout his ministry (for example, crossing over to Tyre and the gentile world, healing the Syrophenician woman's daughter). In the Passion Narrative, he enters even more political settings, in which the ruling authority of that space acts unjustly.

The courtyard of the high priest (14:53–65) was a space ruled by the religious authorities. They use their power in this setting to seek "testimony against Jesus to put him to death" (14:55), to "[condemn] him as deserving death" (14:64b), and to have guards beat him (14:65). The chief priests unrighteously seek false testimony (14:56–59), condemn Jesus on the basis of false testimony, and beat an innocent man.

In Pilate's custody (15:1–20), Pilate realizes "that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed [Jesus] over" (15:10), and Pilate presents Jesus as the logical prisoner to release during Passover (15:6). Receiving pushback from the crowds, Pilate chooses to "satisfy the crowd" and hands Jesus over for execution. Pilate's actions are unjust, since he knowingly and wrongly sentences an innocent Jesus, who is caught up in temple politics. Pilate does not assert his power for justice but uses his position to appease the crowd.

The courtyard of the governor's headquarters (15:16–20) fills with mock pomp as soldiers dress Jesus in a purple cloak, crown him, salute him, saying "Hail, King of the Jews!" and kneel in homage. The soldiers' behavior is unrighteous because they are insincere. These actions are carried out in mockery in order to belittle, not magnify, Jesus.

Regardless of the cruelty and injustice Jesus faces in political settings, Jesus remains committed to a more powerful political setting: the kingdom of God. In the high priest's courtyard, the religious authorities cannot undo Jesus' identity as the Son of God through false testimony; in Pilate's custody, Pilate cannot sacrifice Jesus because Jesus remains the one in control; and in the courtyard of the governor's headquarters, the soldiers cannot minimize Jesus by mocking his authority, since Jesus preserves his dignity and dies and rises the exalted Son of God.

Political characters

Many political characters move the plot of Mark's Passion Narrative forward. Without attempting an exhaustive list, characters

are identified below along with how they function as political characters. Theologically, Mark claims that characters, caught up in the social fabric of life, function politically in ways that support and/or thwart the coming kingdom of God.

- **The woman with an alabaster jar** (14:1–11) is out of place (a nameless woman at a men's meal) and, yet, Jesus defends her belonging in this place and in the gospel narrative, saying "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (14:9). Her presence is political because Jesus welcomes a woman to teach men the practices of faithful discipleship.
- **Judas's** presence may be fitting (a disciple at table with Jesus), but his double agent status unsettles the reader. He colludes with the Pharisees, trading Jesus' liberty for his own financial gain (14:10–11). His presence is political, since he betrays his teacher to ruling authorities (14:43).
- **Chief priests** (also scribes, elders, and high priest) are leaders who have achieved high status and power in their religious institution. Mark shows them wielding their power from a place of fear (11:18, 32), which results in antagonism (14:1) and envy (15:10) toward Jesus. They are political figures because they hold positions of authority and power in their community, which they use *over* the people.
- **Pilate**, the sixth Roman procurator of Judea (26–36 BCE), is a political ruler who had a reputation for corruption and the excessive use of lethal force, according to some Jewish sources (Josephus and Philo).
- **Barabbas** was a prisoner because he was a political rebel undermining the ruling authorities and was accused of committing murder during an insurrection (15:7).
- **Roman soldiers**, who mock Jesus after the trial with Pilate, are employed by the ruling political authority and carry out Pilate's orders. Their mockery of Jesus is explicitly political as they mockingly dress Jesus in kingly attire (15:16–20).
- **Jesus** is portrayed by Mark as a political figure. Mark's narrative makes readers disagree with the chief priests, Pilate, and Roman soldiers, who do not believe Jesus is the Messiah, and, instead, side with the centurion, who proclaims, "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39), a title also given to Roman emperors. Mark claims that Jesus is indeed the Messianic King, another provocative challenge to Roman emperors. Roman authorities, with the collaboration of Jewish temple authorities, executed Jesus as "the King of the Jews" (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26), "the Messiah, King of Israel" (15:32). "A basic theme underscored through [Mark 15:1–20] is that Jesus goes to his death as God's anointed, the King of the Jews."

The disciples prepared and Jesus hosted the Last Supper within the context of a Passover meal. The Passover, itself a political response to a political leader, was the final plague that God visited upon Egypt. . . . It was a form of political resistance to Pharaoh's unjust rule that brought about liberation for the Israelites. The Israelites memorialized the day when political resistance led to liberation.

Political events

Political events dot Mark's Passion Narrative. Consider, in particular, these three: The Last Supper, Jesus' trials, and Jesus' death. To see how the Last Supper functions politically, let's examine the relationship between the Last Supper and Passover and the meaning of a "new covenant." The disciples prepared and Jesus hosted the Last Supper within the context of a Passover meal. The Passover, itself a political response to a political leader, was the final plague that God visited upon Egypt. The plagues created political leverage, which forced Pharaoh to release the captive Israelites. Exodus 11 chronicles this leveraging political response to a political leader: "The Lord said to Moses, 'I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away'" (Exod 11:1). It was a form of political resistance to Pharaoh's unjust rule that brought about liberation for the Israelites. The Israelites memorialized the day when political resistance led to liberation. "Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten'" (Exod 13:3). This memorialization became the Passover meal for which Jesus' disciples prepared.

During the Lord's Supper, Jesus instituted a "new covenant." To institute a new covenant that transcends the ruler's instruction is a political act. Religion professor Richard A. Horsley writes,

Jesus, precisely in the setting of a Passover meal with his disciples celebrating the exodus liberation, performs a covenant renewal that becomes the central communal ritual of the movement he has built (14:12, 22–25). His words over the cup that so clearly refer to the original covenant ceremony make this explicit. Just as the blood of the covenant in the original ceremony (in

Exod 24:3–8) represented a bond between God and the people, who had just vowed to keep the covenant commandments, so the cup Jesus offers represents “my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” This ceremony of covenant renewal at the Passover meal celebrating the exodus, however, is instituted directly over against the Jerusalem and Roman rulers who, just at that point in Mark’s story, are about to capture, condemn, and execute Jesus—presumably with the effect of decapitating the new exodus, the renewed covenant movement of renewal of Israel that Jesus has been heading.

The new covenant, instituted at the Lord’s Supper, functioned politically because it renewed the Passover covenant that took place in the context of civil disobedience in opposition to Pharaoh and oppressive political forces. Now, again, Jesus and his disciples celebrate a meal opposing Jerusalem and Roman rulers along with the region’s oppressive political forces who intend to execute Jesus.

Jesus’ trials—one before high priest, chief priests, elders, and scribes; and one before Pilate—were political events. Jesus is brought first before “the whole council,” which uses Jewish court language, a political construct, with terms such as “witness,” “testimony,” and “condemned.” These terms, used in the context of a trial, had a predetermined outcome (guilty) that power brokers authorized based on false witnesses. The second trial occurs before Pilate, Rome’s curator responsible for Jerusalem. Pilate wants to establish the relationship between Jesus’ authority and Caesar’s authority in order to evaluate political advantage and liability. Pilate purportedly believes Jesus is innocent; however, he condemns Jesus to death in order to “satisfy the crowd” (15:15) and, by implication, make his own political rule easier by pacifying his constituents.

Mark presents Jesus’ death as a political event. Time indicators throughout Mark’s Passion Narrative focus the reader’s attention on the fact that Jesus’ death occurs during Passover—the Jewish liberation festival. These two trials were political events in which Jesus displayed righteousness and power that exceeded that of the priests and Pilate.

Resistance and resilience as positive actions

While “resistance” has often been thought of as a negative response, this essay views resistance as a potentially *positive* action. It is often assumed that resistance involves “fighting,” “opposition,” and “struggle,” and that it is largely a negative response to a stimulus—resistance is “against” something. Without dismissing the negative connotations, political theology sees, in Mark’s Passion Narrative for example, that “resistance” is not limited to a negative response to a stimulus. Resistance also can be a positive practice intentionally developed and employed proactively as a necessary characteristic of faithful disciples. Consider a medical and an ecological analogy. In medicine, a resistant population has a prior, naturally occurring characteristic that allows the community to withstand something toxic. A population resistant to disease is a desirable quality that other communities would work to emulate. Another example from

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ecology: native prairie plants spend most of their first years putting energy into deep roots, which makes them resistant to prairie fires. This positive, resistant quality enables native plants to thrive after prairie fires because they are adapted to their context and able to outcompete invasive plants. Resistance is not only a response to negative stimuli; resistance is also a positive, proactively acquired practice needed to thrive in the real world. The understanding of resistance in this essay more closely aligns with the etymology of *pièce de résistance*, literally “piece of resistance,” which has come to mean the principle dish of a meal (usually meat) or an extraordinary event because resistance is understood to be “staying power.” This article promotes practices of resistance as practices that invest one with staying power.

The following section shows three practices of *resistance* in Mark’s Passion Narrative and then considers how faithful Christians could exercise the same three forms of resistance in current political situations. Then the essay shows three forms of *resilience* in Mark’s Passion Narrative and considers how faithful Christians could exercise the same three forms of resilience in current political situations.

Resistance in Mark’s Passion Narrative

Resistance can be a positive practice exemplified by Jesus and the disciples in the Passion Narrative. Mark’s Passion Narrative contains several instances of resistance, including community-building, truth-telling, and prayer. As mentioned above, these instances of resistance are not reactions to negative stimuli but, rather, instances of proactively acquired practices that provide staying power.

Jesus builds community by establishing relationships in many towns, training his disciples, and accompanying another opposition movement. Since building community takes a long time, this skillful work began well before the Passion Narrative and enabled Jesus to confront unjust systems throughout the Passion Narrative. Jesus was able to establish many diverse relationships because he entered many communities. Movement occurs quickly in Mark because Jesus enters a new town, performs a liberating action, often receives opposition, and moves on. Jesus performs exorcisms and healings, which transform people’s lived experience and forge deep encounters based on liberation. As a result, many people carried forth the vision of his mission even when he was no longer in their community. Building community functions as resistance because it gives his mission staying power by multiplying the number of people committed to his movement during his life and beyond his death.

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Jesus also trains his disciples to be prepared for encounters they will face in his absence. They acquired their own staying power so that, although they suffered a crisis in their relationship—betrayal, abandonment (chapter 15)—they overcame the crisis and were ultimately resistant to the Roman Empire's effort to snuff out the Jesus movement. They became proclaimers of Jesus' death and resurrection and continued Jesus' mission.

Finally, the Passion Narrative also occurs in the context of community, since Jesus' actions in Mark 14–15 occur in the context of people's struggle against the Roman Empire. Jesus accompanies the people's opposition movement, trains disciples, transforms lives through liberative actions, and engages in multiple communities. Through these activities, Jesus established connections that furthered his mission. These community-building practices were proactive practices of resistance that bolstered Jesus' courageous movement through his arrest and trial and carried his movement beyond his death.

Truth-telling is a second practice of resistance that imbues Jesus with staying power. Four examples from Mark's Passion Narrative in which Jesus spoke truth with simplicity and courage illustrate this point. First, positioned at the Eucharistic table, Jesus speaks truth: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me" (14:18). Second, still at the table, Jesus turns attention from one who will betray to the group who will fall away and predicts their abandonment: "You will all fall away" (RSV, 14:27). Third, during Pilate's interrogation of Jesus, Jesus responds to Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" with "You say so" (15:2). Fourth, in an instance of behavioral (rather than verbal) truth-telling, Jesus exhibits calm dignity while enduring trial and mockery (15:4–5, 15b–20). In each of these four instances, Jesus speaks the truth, with simplicity and courage. The truth of Jesus' words is either immediately verifiable (Jesus' dignity is immediately observable even under the pressure of trial, mockery, and beating) or verifiable within the span of one chapter (for example, in 14:27 Jesus predicts the disciples will fall away, and in 14:50 Mark says, "They all deserted him and fled."). Jesus speaks simply—his words are easily comprehended and straightforward. Jesus speaks courageously, naming uncomfortable realities. Yet, he does this without an air of condescension—his statements do not turn the corner toward judgmental ridicule.

Prayer is a third practice of resistance that gives Jesus stead-

fastness to God's mission. Jesus counsels Peter to "Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial" (14:38). Jesus prays that he himself might not have to be put to the test (14:35–36, 39). Jesus seeks another way (besides arrest and crucifixion) to fulfill God's will. Upon not receiving the alternate way that he sought, it is in prayer that Jesus reaffirms the staying power of his commitment to God's mission: "not what I want, but what you want" (14:36) and gains the fortitude to continue to resist forces opposing God's will (unjust political systems and the powers of sin and death). Following prayer, Jesus affirms his staying power within his mission: "The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand" (14:41–42).

Jesus' practices of resistance—community-building, truth-telling, and prayer—increase his own staying power and the staying power of his mission. The resistant staying power of Jesus' mission sustained Jesus for long, grueling work, filled with adversity. Resistance also sustained his work beyond his lifetime, allowing others to carry on after Jesus' resurrection. Resistance can be a positive practice exemplified by Jesus and the disciples in Mark's Passion Narrative.

Resistance in today's politic

Resistance can be a positive practice for Christians within today's politic. The same three practices of resistance (community building, truth-telling, and prayer) that Jesus embodies throughout Mark's Passion Narrative are beneficial practices for Christians to employ today. Proactive resistance is a crucial practice for Christians because it cultivates the staying power needed to remain part of long processes of social transformation catalyzed by the death and resurrection of Christ.

Community building is a practice of resistance in a politic that is seen in the Passion Narrative, practiced by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,¹ and needed by Christians today. Martin Luther King Jr. practiced lasting resistance by building community when he crossed into multiple communities, trained others, and participated in broader community organizing that resonated with God's mission. Martin Luther King Jr. visited many *communities*. Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, he traveled well beyond Atlanta and connected with many other communities and people. He traveled north to Boston, east to Memphis, and south to St. Augustine. He traveled the furthest to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. In each of these places he spoke and acted in ways that multiplied the significance of his mission and increased his support base. In his acceptance speech at Oslo, he said, "After contemplation, I conclude that this award which I receive on behalf of that movement is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral

1. While this essay focuses on the kind of resistance that proactively equips one with staying power, there is a wider need for skills of Christian non-violent resistance that involves responses to unjust systems, as seen, for example, in the marches, actions, and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Rosa Parks with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (ca. 1955).

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question of our time—the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.”² He made it clear that the award he received was not for him alone, but for a whole movement. He also extended the mission to all listening and invited people’s recognition that nonviolent action is the way to overcome violence and oppression. King also built community by *training others*. He made decisions with confidants who became equipped to lead alongside him and beyond his death. King also practiced resistance to unjust political systems by *joining movements* begun by other community-based groups. He did not have to begin the movement, and it did not have to

2. “Martin Luther King Jr. – Acceptance Speech” (on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1964), https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance_en.html, accessed 6.6.2017.

be an explicitly “Christian” movement. Martin Luther King Jr. joined the Montgomery bus boycott after the actions of Rosa Parks initiated it.³ King’s community building through connecting with multiple communities, training others, and joining movements was a positive act of resistance that infused his movement with greater staying power.

Truth-telling is a positive practice of resistance for Christians to enact within the polis. Speaking truth simply and with courage stands in contrast to political systems where truth-telling is optional.⁴ In a *Harvard Gazette* article “Politics in a Post-Truth Age,” Christina Pazzanese writes, “It’s true that what [Donald J.] Trump is saying is false, it’s just that in the post-truth age of politics, we’re beyond criticizing someone for that. It’s like criticizing an actor for saying a lot of false things. He says whatever he needs to say to move people emotionally.”⁵ In this climate, it certainly is subversive to speak truth in a straightforward and courageous manner.⁶

As a form of resistance, Christians can speak truthfully about political issues such as climate change. Pope Francis did this in the encyclical *Laudato Si*, where he writes, “[Mother Earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.”⁷ He goes on to call for all people to have honest conversation about the needs of the earth. French President Emmanuel Macron added to the plea for truthful thinking about climate change when he addressed U.S. citizens after the U.S. President announced the intention of the U.S. to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement.⁸

Addressing climate change is a political issue, but it is also a Christian issue. The call for care for God’s good creation resounds throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s (ELCA) commitment to truth-telling related to climate change is nothing new. In the 1993 Social Statement, “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice,” the ELCA affirms, “Humans, in service to God, have special roles on

3. Rosa Parks with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (ca. 1955). Wikimedia Commons, NARA, public domain <https://share.ehs.uen.org/node/9217>, accessed 6.9.2017.

4. “The Post-Truth World: Yes, I’d Lie to You,” *The Economist* (September 10, 2016), <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21706498-dishonesty-politics-nothing-new-manner-which-some-politicians-now-lie-and>, accessed 5.2017.

5. Christina Pazzanese, “Politics in a Post-Truth Age,” *Harvard Gazette* (July 14, 2016). <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/07/politics-in-a-post-truth-age/>, accessed 6.6.2017.

6. A definite article, “the,” is not used with truth in order to indicate that truth is multiple. At the same time “truth” is discussed because the multiplicity of truth does not render truth non-existent or purely relative. Truth exists. The Word proclaims truth to power. Christians can speak truth to power.

7. Pope Francis, “Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home” (May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, accessed 6.6.2017.

8. “French President Emmanuel Macron Responds to Trump: ‘Make our Planet Great Again’” (June 1, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/1/15727140/emmanuel-macron-trump-paris-agreement-make-our-planet-great-again>, accessed 6.6.2017.

behalf of the whole of creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth.”⁹ The ELCA has reaffirmed the validity of the science that shows climate change is occurring and Lutherans’ “moral obligation to our most vulnerable neighbors, to future generations, and to all of God’s creation to act on climate change.”¹⁰ Truth-telling is a practice needed increasingly within the polis in order to remain steadfast to the mission of God in the world.

Prayer is a third resistant practice that imbues one with staying power. Through prayer, Jesus was able to encourage the disciples to action: “Get up, let us be going” (14:42). The grit and determination seen in the Garden of Gethsemane resulted from the staying power Jesus received in prayer. Such resistance is needed in our multiple publics today. Bishop Ken Untener’s “Oscar Romero Prayer” seeks resistance through prayer:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. . . .

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. . . .

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way. . . .

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.¹¹

Bishop Romero maintained resistance (to systems that reinscribed cycles of poverty and oppression) through praying and leading prayer services. For himself and those he led, prayer was a vehicle of resistance that allowed them to “get up and be going.” Through prayer, one can listen and discern so that one’s participation in social transformation remains consistent with God’s mission in the world. With the positive resistance that prayer offers, Christians can remain committed to God’s ways in the world and be ready to “get up and be going” when action is needed. Resistance can be a positive practice for Christians within today’s polis.

Resilience in the Passion Narrative

Resilience is a positive action exemplified by Jesus and the disciples in Mark’s Passion Narrative. Whereas resistance allows one to have staying power, resilience allows one to act. Three practices of resilience shown in Mark’s Passion Narrative are reliance on community, equipping others, and tenacious action. These practices

Mutual reliance on one another in community is an act of resilience because it allows one to continue being active for the long haul. No one is an island, and communities buoy people up and enable them to lead or slipstream as their energy allows.

allowed Jesus and his community to remain active for the long haul, despite oppositional forces that sought to shut down Jesus and his mission.

Jesus relied on his *communities*. Even before the Passion Narrative, he taught the disciples solidarity through hospitality—the disciples were sent out anticipating that sympathizers would provide for their needs. Jesus instructed the disciples to take only a walking stick (6:8–9) so they could be highly mobile and *not* fully self-sufficient—they had to rely on others. In the Passion Narrative, Jesus relied on the disciples to prepare the Passover meal; then he attended to those same disciples who relied on him. Mutual reliance on one another in community is an act of resilience because it allows one to continue being active for the long haul. No one is an island, and communities buoy people up and enable them to lead or slipstream as their energy allows.

Mark shows a second practice of resilience: *equipping others* to lead. Jesus equips the disciples by interpreting events to them, which increases their leadership competence. Jesus interprets his impending death to the disciples as the coming-near of the Kingdom of God. In equipping the disciples to interpret his death as God’s kingdom coming near, even when they don’t understand or accept his impending death, Jesus practices resilience because he hopes the disciples will continue being faithful to Jesus’ mission even after his death. Jesus also interprets his death as a new covenant. In the Lord’s Supper, he says “my blood of the covenant,” which enables the disciples to understand their ongoing mission in terms of a new covenant defined by Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Lord’s Supper ends with positive anticipation, which defies expectations because it suggests that Jesus’ death leaves the disciples moving forward in mission, not stymied in inaction. When Mark ends the Gospel with “for they were afraid” (16:8), that doesn’t mean that the disciples didn’t receive the message that the risen Jesus “is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7), that the disciples continued to fail to understand Jesus’ death, and that they failed to continue Jesus’ mission. On the contrary, the very existence of Mark’s Gospel testifies to their *resilience*. Jesus practices and extends resilience when he equips the disciples to interpret events in light of Jesus’ new covenant, which liberates captives from the deathly practices of this world.

9. See <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/EnvironmentSS.pdf>.

10. “ELCA Supports Paris Agreement on Climate Change” (12/17/2015), <https://elca.org/News-and-Events/7804>, accessed 6.6.2017.

11. Bishop Ken Untener, “Archbishop Oscar Romero Prayer: A Step Along the Way” (11/1979), http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/archbishop_romero_prayer.cfm, accessed 6.6.2017.



Desertpeace, "From the Other Side of the Wall."

Mark shows a third practice of resilience: *tenacious action*. Jesus invites the disciples to be tenacious in their actions, undeterred by opposition to God's mission. He exhorts the disciples to be unflappable in the face of hardship; instead of shutting down, he encourages the disciples to keep awake. He teaches the disciples to expect persecution and to respond with activity rather than passivity. Specifically, he teaches that persecution is an occasion for active witness rather than for inactive discouragement. When Jesus is betrayed and unjustly arrested, he witnesses to scripture being fulfilled. When the high priest looked for false testimony against Jesus, he found some contradicting accounts cited against Jesus, but these incompatible accounts stood up poorly in comparison to Jesus' true testimony: "I am" (14:62). Jesus also equipped the disciples for tenacious action by assuring them that his words were true. The disciples were reassured that Jesus' words are true when he told them how to prepare for the Passover, and they "found everything as he had told them" (14:16); when he told them one of them would betray him, and Judas did just that (14:18, 43); when he told them all of them would desert him, and they all did just that (14:27, 50); and when he said "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (14:28), and he did just that (16:7). Resilience is a positive action exemplified by Jesus and the disciples in the Passion Narrative.

Resilience in today's polis

Resilience is a positive action for Christians within today's polis. The three practices of resilience (reliance on community, equipping others, and tenacious action) that Jesus embodies throughout Mark's Passion Narrative are positive practices for Christians to employ today. Resilience is a crucial practice for Christians because it enables the persistent action needed to remain active in the kinds of social transformation called for by Jesus' life-mission and his death and resurrection.

Reliance on community is a resilient action that facilitates faithful action in one's current politic. People's resilience is greater when in community. This is partially because there is strength and fortitude in numbers. It is also because people have increased capacity to remain active when there is support. On the other hand, people tend to isolate themselves when they are least resilient—isolation

Pope Francis' comment is strong: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel."

is a warning sign of depletion. People can remain more socially engaged when relying on community, since resilience increases with community support. Threats to mutual interdependence undermine the resilience needed to be active in justice-oriented transformation. The constant tending that reliance requires involves counteracting practices that injure community. For example, walls separating Palestinians from their historic homes and places of work are unjust, decrease the ability to rely on community, and are an affront to freedom and community.¹² A proposed wall threatens to separate Mexico and the U.S. The International Bonhoeffer Society composed a statement critiquing this proposed wall: "Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself taught the profound relatedness of all human persons and, indeed, of peoples and nations. We therefore *feel called to raise our voices in support of justice and peace, and in resistance to every form of unjust discrimination and aggressive nationalism*."¹³ The words of Leviticus speak loudly, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev 19:33–34). A wall between the U.S. and Mexico injures reliance on community and opposes Jesus' actions of breaking down boundaries. Pope Francis' comment is strong: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel."¹⁴ Creating walls that divide people is a theological and biblical offense to Christians, who worship a God who transgresses boundaries in order to build bridges for community. Reliance on community includes actions that preserve community. Sometimes the preservation of community includes actions that defy the forces that oppose God. Actions that promote reliance on community are positive acts of resilience that enable Christians to remain active for faithful social transformation.

12. Desertpeace, "From the Other Side of the Wall," <https://desertpeace.wordpress.com/2013/10/22/from-the-other-side-of-the-wall-a-palestinian-teen-looks-at-the-settlements-video/>, accessed 6.10.2017.

13. "Statement Issued by the Board of Directors of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section, February 1, 2017," http://thebonhoeffercenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=148:statement-by-the-board-of-directors-of-the-international-bonhoeffer-society-english-language-section-1-february-2017&catid=12&Itemid=208, accessed 6.12.2017.

14. "Pope Warns Against Walls Ahead of US Election," CNN (November 7, 2016), <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/06/europe/pope-walls-us-election-trump/index.html>, accessed 6.6.2017.

Following the lead of Jesus in Mark's Passion Narrative, Christians can *equip others*. Communities can be equipped for faithful action in many ways; one of these is community organizing. Professor Ray Pickett writes about community organizing as an active Christian practice: "Those involved in faith-rooted community organizing see it as a practical strategy for building relationships with our neighbors so, through the power of the Spirit, we can act together in concert to work for a world ordered according to God's purpose."¹⁵ Christians are called to be involved in faith-rooted community organizing work toward justice, which the New Testament describes as right relationship with God and others. Since a gap exists in the current polis, between the world as it is and the world according to God's purpose, there are many broken, unjust relationships in need of faith-rooted community organizers. Each Christian can equip others by taking up community organizing through actions such as building relationships or leading actions that confront systemic injustice and urge just relationships. Equipping others is a practice of resilience needed for persistent action that increases right relationships within the polis and calls for justice in systems.

Tenacious action is a third practice of resilience that is found in Mark's Passion Narrative and is needed by Christians who engage today's polis. Ongoing action is crucial within a climate where startling ineptitude and overt coercion demotivate people's participation. Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker Movement, promoted tenacious action:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.¹⁶

Giving up will not do. Rather than being silenced by confusion

Rather than being silenced by confusion and dismay, rather than buying into the disempowering idea that one's actions make no difference, Christians can tenaciously enact God's word of liberation and oppose unjust policies and speech of leaders that put the most vulnerable in society at increased risk.

and dismay, rather than buying into the disempowering idea that one's actions make no difference, Christians can tenaciously enact God's word of liberation and oppose unjust policies and speech of leaders that put the most vulnerable in society at increased risk. Tenacious action is a positive practice of resilience for Christians within today's polis.

Conclusion

Mark's Passion Narrative exhibits a political theology of resistance and resilience. Resistance and resilience are faithful Christian practices not only in the Passion Narrative but also within today's political climate. They are positive practices because they are the staying power and ability to act in the world that Jesus modeled. People participate in resistance and resilience as positive practices when they enact these practices in ways that resonate with God's liberating movement in the world.

15. Ray Pickett, "Bearing Witness through Community Organizing," *Living Lutheran* (August 5, 2016), <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2016/08/bearing-witness-community-organizing/>, accessed 6.11.2017.

16. Dorothy Day, as cited by the *Tacoma Catholic Worker*, <http://tacomacatholicworker.weebly.com/peace--justice-work.html>, accessed 6.11.2017.