

Following the Outlaw Jesus
Mark 1:14-20, Epiphany 3, Year B
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Ninety-nine percent of all motorcycle gangs are law-abiding. That's comforting, I suppose, except for what it implies about the other one percent! Indeed, there are motorcycle gangs who refer to themselves as "one-percenters," which means they take pride in their status as the one percent of bikers who are also outlaws. The most well-known one-percenter gang is the Hell's Angels. Others, who are less notorious, but no more law-abiding, are the Pagans and the Bandidos. One-percenters distrust and subvert the authorities. They exist just outside acceptable society. For the past four years, television viewers have become accustomed with the life of such motorcycle gangs through the *FX* drama "Sons of Anarchy."

In Mark's Gospel, we read about another group that travels the road together. Today, the first four recruits are enlisted, but eventually there will be twelve members plus their leader, enough to qualify as a gang. They, too, distrust and subvert authority. They, too, find themselves just outside the bounds of what society considers acceptable. And their leader? He was trained and formed by an outlaw—John the Baptist—as today's Gospel reveals in a throwaway line at the outset, "*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee...*" In fact, this gang's leader will eventually find himself executed as an outlaw between two outlaws.

I became fascinated by outlaw motorcycle gangs—one-percenters—a few months ago when I found on Facebook an old high school friend, Todd, with whom I'd lost contact. (I've changed his name to protect him and me.) Todd's Facebook profile included a graphic with fluorescent green lettering and a cartoon red devil. The graphic read "Brazos," and I was intrigued enough to do a quick Google search. It turns out "Brazos" refers to the Brazos Motorcycle Club, a one-percenter outlaw gang, and I soon learned that my friend is a Brazos "prospect," or probationary member.ⁱ

Depending on which news outlet one reads, the Brazos Motorcycle Club runs guns, traffics in drugs, and otherwise participates in organized crime. I don't know how much of that is true, but I do know the *Huffington Post* reports that last October the Los Angeles Brazos got into a gunfight with a rival Hell's Angels chapter over which gang could lay claim to the neighborhood Starbucks. (Only in the twenty-first century, I suppose!) Two men ended up dead from gunshot wounds.ⁱⁱ

Not wanting to learn nitty-gritty details that might require him to kill me, I did not ask Todd any questions about Brazos, but I did begin to frequent his Facebook profile and monitor what he was doing.

Soon, virtually every post on Todd's profile referenced the motorcycle gang. Todd even changed his name to "Knuckles Slide," a moniker apparently given him by the club. He was marked, by tattooing his entire right arm in a virtual sleeve of flames. He now wears only green, including a denim vest covered in Brazos patches. Todd—a fire fighter by training—has even given up his job and opened a new small business with its own logo printed in that conspicuous Brazos fluorescent green. I suspect the business is a front for the motorcycle gang. One day another Brazos prospect posted on Todd's wall about how arduous the membership process for the gang is. Todd's response was, "It takes everything you've got, but it's worth it."

The call of Simon and Andrew, James and John to follow Jesus is actually not so different. Jesus walks by and says, "Follow me," from which a number of radical moves occur. These four are the middle class of their day. They own their own boats and nets. They provide for their families. And yet, something about Jesus causes them to leave it all behind. They give up their livelihood and front for a leader who will refuse again and again to concede to societal convention. Simon will even receive a new name—Peter, the Rock—indicative of an entirely new identity. These four and their friends will be faced repeatedly, both before and after the death of their leader, with situations that demand they either present the easy way the world deems acceptable or else in their words and actions—with every decision, large and small—present an alternative way of being, one that declares God's grace at work in their lives as evidently as if they were covered in fluorescent green patches.

That's what it means, after all, to "fish for people." It means for the followers of Jesus to participate in his work evidently, overtly, and contrary to what people expect and accept. These four who Jesus calls today will, essentially, *give up who they are* when they become members of Jesus' gang. Except we don't call them members. We have a special name for this kind of loyalty, this kind of self-giving. We call it *discipleship*.

On his Facebook page, my friend Todd lists his religion as "agnostic," but it isn't so. Everything about Todd makes clear that his religion is, in fact, the Brazos Motorcycle Club. He has laid his life at its feet. He has changed his name and marked his body and given away

everything for its cause. Todd has become a disciple of the Brazos gang, and that is, by any definition, a religious commitment.

I find myself asking: What is it that makes someone give up everything for identity in a one-percenter gang engaged in brutal criminal activity? Likely, part of the allure is power, a sense of invincibility that comes with traveling the road among others who carry guns and move about in a pack. But I suspect a bigger part is that the Brazos care for Todd. In a world in which purpose is superficial and fleeting, they give him meaning. And, he has become an icon for *them*, via his name, his attire, the markings on his very body, and his daily labor. As Todd said, “It takes everything you’ve got, but it’s worth it.”

Now, a harder question for us: If Todd can turn his life over, wholly and willingly, to a one-percenter motorcycle gang, to a group of thugs who stage shootouts at Starbucks, why can’t we turn our lives over to Jesus the Christ, who bleeds grace and saves us?

When one meets Todd—excuse me, Knuckles Slide—on the street, there is no doubt that he is a Brazos disciple. When one meets us, is there any indication at all in our names, in our dress, in our words and our actions that we have given our lives away, that we are disciples of that outlaw crucified between two outlaws?

Todd is marked by a right arm tattooed in a sleeve of flame. Lest we forget, *we, too, are marked*, sealed on our foreheads by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever. We are not members of this or any church, not primarily. We are disciples of the outlaw Jesus, who declares pardon where the world would condemn, who loves where the world would hate, who extends grace where the world would sow suffering.

There is power in following this Jesus. There is strength. For those who live in Christ, ultimately and forever we are invincible. But more importantly, Jesus the Christ cares for us—*loves* us—and when we gather around him and with one another, we are able to embody that care in ways that can move the world from brokenness to grace. We disciples can become icons of the outlaw Jesus we claim to serve. And when we do, our lives take on meaning unlike anything we’ve ever experienced, a meaning so deep that all worldly locations of meaning—including the Brazos Motorcycle Club—look like grotesque caricatures by comparison.

Jesus calls us today. “The time is fulfilled,” he says. “The kingdom of God is near.” When you leave this place, will anyone know you are a member of this outlaw gang? Will anyone see the mark? Will your words, your actions and your decisions reveal the leader in whom you find deepest meaning, your very life, and your new name, *Christian*? It takes everything we’ve got to follow the outlaw Jesus, but it’s worth it. *Amen.*

ⁱ I have also changed the name of the motorcycle gang.

ⁱⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/27/hells-angels-gang-fight-w_n_1062730.html