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1 Peter 5:13–14, ESV.

¹³ She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. ¹⁴ Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

The Garbage People: *People of Deep Faith*.

Here are the last two verses of 1st Peter:

¹³ She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. ¹⁴ Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

There are two letters in the Bible – 1st and 2nd Peter - whose text claim that the Apostle Peter authored them. The two letters appear, however, to be written by different people. There are two theories. The first is that both were written by followers of Peter and not Peter himself. Another theory is that 1st Peter was written by the Apostle Peter, but not 2nd Peter. What is true, is that from very ancient times, readers of 1st Peter were convinced they were reading the words of Peter, so we will continue as if he did indeed write the book. In our quote, Peter offers his best wishes to those who have read the letter, along with greetings from “she who is at Babylon” and “Mark, my son”. It is believed that the first

refers to the church at Rome, since Rome was considered corrupt and therefore like ancient Babylon, and it is thought that the second refers to Mark, the person who wrote the Gospel of Mark. Mark is in a sense Peter's spiritual son. So, the author of the Gospel that we believe was the first Gospel written, in the 50's or 60's A.D., was a mentee of the Apostle Peter. Many people believe that the Gospel of Mark represents to a large degree Peter's thinking.

But Mark was also a mentee and evangelistic companion of Paul. In Philemon, which we are confident Paul did write, he says this:

"²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

Mark, as a very young man, along with his cousin Barnabas, and Paul, traveled together. It is important to keep in mind that none of the four Gospels identifies their authors, but it is widely believed that Mark did indeed write the Gospel of Mark. A number of very early church authors have stated that he was the author. It's important to emphasize that Mark was not an Apostle. He was a generation younger and worked with both the Apostle Peter and Paul the Great Evangelist.

Mark is written in simple Greek; it smacks of nonfiction storytelling, and not literary elegance. He is communicating with average people of his world. We don't know of any written material that he used as a starting point; we assume

that he was writing up the oral traditions passed on by those who were of Jesus' generation, like Peter and the other Apostles. A major focus of his are the tribulations that confront Christians as they live their faith in a pagan world.

We tend to give Paul the lion's share of the credit for founding the Christian Church. We give secondary credit to the Apostles, especially Peter and John. But because his post-Paul, independent work is not mentioned in any of the books of the New Testament, and because this happened outside the proto-European church and outside the Jerusalem church, we tend to not give Mark proper credit for what he almost certainly did, and that was to establish the Christian church in north Africa. It is widely believed that Mark evangelized Alexandria, which is on the coast of north Africa, in Egypt. We think that Mark arrived there somewhere around 43 A.D., but it could have been a bit later. His church became known as the Coptic Church, and before Muslims captured Cairo in 639 A.D., the Coptic church was a dominant faith in Egypt. There is still a vibrant, although oppressed Coptic minority in Cairo today. Cairo is about 100 miles inland from Alexandria. Several ancient texts written by well-known theologians of the time, including writings of the second century theologian Clement of Alexandria, indicate that Mark did travel to Egypt and become the first Bishop of Alexandria. So, while we in the West think of Mark as the young traveling companion of Paul, and the

somewhat unknown author of the shortest Gospel, the Christians in Egypt see him as the father of their church. Importantly, Christianity in Africa spread outward from the church in Alexandria, first to northeastern Africa, then further. Mark planted the seed of the faith in Africa – which today is one of the most vibrant, fastest growing Christian communities in the world.

Wendy and I went to Egypt three years ago. We did the usual, seeing the Pyramids, the Great Sphinx, and tombs in the Valley of the Kings. What I didn't know before going there was that there are many ancient Egyptian Temples. Their interiors are covered with faded, but colorful hieroglyphs. In the first few centuries, Christians were very much an oppressed minority and often had to hide to avoid persecution. Many of them lived in ancient Egyptian temples, which had been abandoned. Some of the temples were transformed into churches, and occasionally, today, you can see a cross that they carved in the wall of a temple.

But for me, the highlight of our trip was visiting Coptic Cairo. In 641 A.D., the first Muslim invaders entered Egypt. Gradually, almost all Egyptians became converted. Today, somewhere between 5 and 10 percent of the population is still Coptic Christian, a tradition that has been kept alive since the time of Mark. A large percentage of them are extremely poor, as they have been marginalized. In Cairo, we met up with a former Ph.D. student of mine, whose name is Nabil. He

has a wife, who is a physician, and three grown children. Nabil is a professor in Egypt, the chair of his department. He spent three days showing Wendy and me around the Coptic Christian parts of Cairo. Their liturgical language is the Coptic language, which is the last stage of the ancient Egyptian language. We encountered one large community of Christians who have been so marginalized that they survive by collecting garbage from all over Cairo. I will get back to them.

Mark wrote about persecution several times in his Gospel. Here are words, quoted from the mouth of Jesus, from Chapter 13:

⁹ “But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹ And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. ¹² And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. ¹³ And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Mark’s church faced persecution first from pagan faiths that had risen to replace the ancient Egyptian faith, and then from the Muslim majority – and it faces persecution today. The Coptic Church is a story of two millennia of persecution.

Mark also wrote about Christians and their relationship to the poor. There is one particularly poetic verse in the next Chapter, 14. Again, these are the words of Jesus, spoken late in his ministry when he was about to die:

⁷For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.

Jesus is first telling his followers that the poor will always need to be taken care of. The second sentence is little harder to interpret. What Jesus is saying is that yes, you must take care of the physical needs of the poor – but do not forget that you must also care for people’s spiritual needs. He is telling them that it is now their job to establish and build the church - something Mark certainly did. And today, the deep faith of these largely poor Christians in Egypt is truly amazing.

One day, Nabil, my former student, drove Wendy and me to the top of Moqattam Mountain on the outskirts of Cairo to an area where the residents are called the Zabbaleen. It is better known to the general population in Cairo as the “City of Garbage”. This is a very poor Christian community that to a westerner looks horrific, despite it being in an otherwise stunning location with a panoramic view of Cairo. The city itself consists of rundown brick and cement buildings with mountains of rotting garbage everywhere. Many of the people there live in hand-made shacks that in the U.S. would be condemned and bulldozed as unsafe.

The neighborhood of the Zabbaleen is called Manshiyat Naser, and just as the people of greater Cairo call it “City of Garbage”, they call the Zabbaleen the “Garbage People”. There are about 70,000 Zabbaleen. They scratch out a living

by acting as Cairo's garbage collectors and recyclers. The men and older boys go door to door in Cairo, a city of almost 10 million, collecting trash for free. They bring it back to their rambling, informal facility, and manually sort it into cardboard, glass, metal, etc., and sell it in bulk to people who will reuse it. While the men and older boys do the collecting, the women, girls, and younger boys pick through the trash looking for recyclables. It is a massive operation. The women also create jewelry and art out of recyclable items. It is one of the most effective recycling operations in the world, giving the citizens of Cairo a free service that recycles up to 90% of their trash – a truly amazing percentage, not matched by even the most industrialized nations, which typically recycle less than 20% of their trash. But the Zabbaleen live in a highly disease-ridden environment. As you drive through this neighborhood, you pass trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, and donkey-driven carts piled high with vast amounts of refuse going uphill and with recyclables going downhill. Much of the area smells like an exposed landfill. Because they are a minority, they are relegated to living this way.

But there is a beautiful church there. The Zabbaleen are Coptic Christians, and their congregation has built a church out of a cave – and that church seats 20,000. It is called the St. Simon Monastery. It is informally called the Cave Church, and only hardy visitors go there, as one must wander a series of narrow,

crowded mountain streets through the neighborhood of the congregants. These people are desperately poor, but their church is an engineering marvel, and it is meticulously clean and beautifully adorned. Men and women in their twenties spend their Sabbath afternoons teaching the children about the Bible, Jesus, the Apostles, and their faith. When we were there, their service had ended hours before, but the Cave Church was still filled with people, most of them young, continuing to worship God, fellowshiping with each other, and serving God by serving the needs of each other. The kids there welcome visitors and love to have their pictures taken with them. This is an ancient – very ancient – congregation, which dates to the pre-Islamic invasion of Egypt. They have been the victims of numerous terrorist attacks in recent decades, and the Egyptian government has often failed to pursue their attackers. They have little representation in government, the police do not respond when they call, and even though they are the most ancient of the current Egyptian peoples, they are looked down upon as tribal “garbage people”. Yet, they have found a way to not simply survive, but to thrive and live radiant lives totally centered around their faith. They are unarmed and vulnerable – and all visitors to their town and church are embraced warmly.

These are believers doing whatever they must to support their congregation and their church. They have found a way to survive as humans and

to thrive as Christians. They are incredibly welcoming, hard-working, and faithful people. Their current church was built in the 1960's. They found a small cave and blasted out 2.5 million tons of rock to expand the cave and build their incredible sanctuary. It is filled with stunning carvings, etched in the stone itself, and depicting such things as the birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Lazarus, and the story of Joseph from the Old Testament. There are also monastery buildings on the grounds. When they blasted the cave, they were nervous that they would attract the attention of their downhill Moslem neighbors, so they waited until the end of the fast of Ramadan, when the Moslems shot off canons to let people know they could eat. When the canons went off, so did the dynamite – and no one in the rest of Cairo, down the mountain, noticed them building the Cave Church. Both the church and the recycling efforts are now internationally recognized facilities, and the church has a devoted congregation. We were there on the afternoon of their Sabbath – on Friday, to accommodate a Moslem weekly calendar – and hundreds of children were gleefully attending Sunday School, which is of course, held on Friday. The kids were happy, laughing and playing and listening to young adults teach them about their faith. We drove through their massive recycling operations to the Church. A young woman immediately

recognized us as visitors and showed us around. They asked nothing of us, but of course we gave them a donation.

There are people who think that the most important passage in the Gospel of Mark is from Chapter 10, verse 45. This chapter is largely about discipleship and the obligation to share our faith. It also focuses heavily on the risks associated with discipleship in a world that did not approve of Christianity. It tells us that that we must live for the things of God's kingdom, not the kingdom of people. Here are Jesus' words, spoken to some of his Apostles:

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Christians we met in Egypt, both in Cairo, and up in the City of Garbage, live with persecution and largely in poverty. They welcome all visitors, are completely unarmed and unprotected, and have gladly inherited this mission of Jesus Christ, to offer themselves in service to others. They are not drifting away from their faith: they are passing it on generation after generation. And, through emigration, they are spreading their faith throughout the U.S. and Europe. While our congregations are shrinking and disappearing, theirs are growing in size and multiplying in number. My hope is that a day will come when Americans realize that the warmest, happiest, and most helpful communities are ones of faith.