

September 19th, 2021

Mark 9:30-37 “Upside Down”

People ask me why I like the Gospel of Mark so much. Well, most biblical scholars agree that Mark is the oldest gospel that we have in our hands. It predates Matthew and Luke by 20 years, and John gospel by at least 40 years. I guess for me, it seems closest to the source. It's definitely the most straightforward in the way it lays out the story of Jesus. There's not a lot of fluff. There's no prologues or birth narratives. No lingering epilogues with long goodbyes and commissions. It starts with Jesus getting baptized and ends at his resurrection. I like to think of Mark's gospel as “raw, unfiltered Jesus.” I also like how the *disciples* are depicted in Mark. In all four gospels, the disciples are portrayed as examples of what not to be, but there's something about the way Mark describes them that makes you say, “Oh good heavens, these guys just didn't get it.” Or we say, “Yeah, that's probably what *I* would have said and done too ... word for word.” And that's how I feel about the story we have in front of us this morning. Its so relatable.

For the second time, Jesus tells his disciples about his inevitable betrayal, death and resurrection. And then Mark says, “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” In the south, folks would say, “Oh, bless their hearts! They just don't get it.” We saw this last week too. Jesus predicted his death, but Peter pulled him aside and said, “What's wrong with you Jesus? You need to stop talking about this!” And Jesus turned around and called Peter a “satan” and proceeded to teach them all a little lesson about what it means to take up their crosses and follow him.

This week Jesus again makes a prediction about his death. Then it gets really quiet because the disciples aren't sure what they should say this time. But then they start talking quietly amongst each other. Then it gets a little louder. And even louder still. And pretty soon it becomes apparent that they're bickering over something. As a parent of three

boys, I found myself relating to this story all too well. Because I remember this happening in our house. The boys would just be playing together and then things would get quiet. Uh-oh. That's not a good thing. Then you'd hear whispering, and the whispering turns into bickering. Every now and then you hear, "No!" "Stop." "Nuh-uh." "Liar." "Shhh be quiet." So I'd turn around and say, "What are you guys bickering about?" And their answer, of course, was, "Nothing!" This is what's happening here in Mark's gospel. Jesus tells them, "The son of man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed he'll rise ... wait a minute. Are you guys arguing? I'm trying to tell you something here. What are you arguing about?" "Nuthin'." They don't want to say, "Oh we're arguing about which one of us is the greatest" because they know how stupid that sounds and they don't want Jesus calling them "satans."

Here's something to think about. How often do we get caught up in petty arguments or petty discussions? Especially in the age of social media. Because if you just step back and listen to yourself you really have wonder, "Would I tell Jesus I was arguing about this?" How would Jesus respond? Would he say, "What are you arguing about on FaceBook? Why did you even respond to that internet troll?" And you realize the only thing you can say is, "Uhhhh ... I don't know." This is what happens when you read Mark's gospel. It seems like the disciples' bar is set pretty low, but at the same time, there's a lot we can relate to.

So, the disciples are arguing about who's the greatest, and, as expected, they get a lesson from Jesus, but it's in in two parts. The first part of the lesson is about servitude or servant leadership. The lesson here is, "Whoever wants to be first must be the least of all and servant to all." The disciples lived in a society where everyone was scrambling for status and safety. Which, if we're to be honest, isn't much different from the way we're living now. And, "bless their hearts," the disciples were good hearted people, but they didn't have much status-wise. They "hitched their wagon" to Jesus because they saw something in him that gave them a sense of safety and security. They recognized the wisdom

of his teachings. They saw that he was all about healing and wholeness and lifting people up. They, like us, wanted to do the right thing but they never wanted to get too far away from the herd either. Our sense of security causes us to say, “Do good, but also do whatever you can to either stay in front of the herd or at least in the middle of the herd, because it’s dangerous to be either at the tail end or worse, left behind.” So when Jesus comes along and says something like, “I’m going to purposely put myself in danger,” the disciples don’t want to hear it. And even if they do hear it, they try to silence him. It is so hard for us to deal with our own “status and safety-seeking selves” because nobody wants to admit how easy it is to find fear in ourselves. How many of us still live with the insecurity that “we are not enough?” When we feel this way, we try to find that sense of security through the things we do.

We ministers are horribly guilty of this. Sometimes we try to find security through affirmation from other people. We think, “Okay, I need to look a certain way here, so what should I wear to project a certain image?” Or “How is this going to look on camera?” “Am I producing enough?” Or “What are other churches doing?” But this can be said about any person in any vocation. We’re *all* looking for security but not always in the right places. And as strange as this may sound, sometimes this leads us into the kind of petty arguments the disciples would have with each other. Yet Jesus calls us out of this mindset. He challenges us to ask tough questions like, “What are we trying to persevere by insulating ourselves against harm?” Or by trying to be popular enough or likable enough or loved enough? He makes us think about what we’re even trying to insulate ourselves against. Is it death? Are we trying to insulate ourselves against death? Jesus is asking his disciples, “How do you all think this is going to end? No one is getting out of this alive.” And that is absolutely *terrifying to hear*, but absolutely *liberating to confront*. No wonder they didn’t understand what he was saying and why they were too afraid to ask.

The second part of Jesus’ lesson involves a child. Now this is where we need be careful about how and what we think this lesson is all about.

Most people will say that this story is about how much Jesus loves children. “Jesus loves the little children, all of the children of the world.” We have this painting somewhere in the church ... I think it’s in a cabinet over in room 4 where we have music practice. Jesus is sitting on a rock and all these children are gathered around him listening patiently as Jesus strikes the pose of a wise teacher. Behold. See how the savior loves the little children. And I’m not saying that Jesus doesn’t love children. Jesus most certainly loves children. In chapter 10 of Mark’s gospel there’s this great story about the disciples trying to run off a bunch of children whose parents just wanted Jesus to bless them. But Jesus tells the disciples, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

Yeah, that’s not this story. That story does make more sense when you understand what *this* story is about, but no ... this is not the romanticized “Children are adorable. Isn’t Jesus sweet? Jesus loves kids. Kids are the best” lesson that we think it is. This is an entirely different lesson. This is part two of Jesus still dealing with these twelve “bless their heart” guys who are arguing about which one of them was the greatest disciple. This is when Jesus turns his disciples’ world upside down. This is Jesus showing the disciples what he means when he says, “whoever wants to be first must be last.” This child is the practical application of what “last” really means. Now, brace yourself, I’m about ready to sound kind of heartless here.

What do you picture when Mark says that Jesus “took a little child and put it among them?” I’m glad the version that Mary read made it clear that the child was little. “Paedion” is the word here in Greek. That’s where we get “pediatrician.” This was a *little* child. Oh, dear heavens, please forgive me for the questions I’m about ready to ask: What good is a little child?

Excuse me ... did you just ask us what good is a little child?
Yes.

They're cute! They're beautiful! They give us a sense of hope for the future. They soften our hearts when the world seems like a helpless and hopeless place. Who doesn't smile when you tickle a baby's foot and the baby giggles? Maybe you don't, pastor ... you *monster*, but the rest of us do!

No ... let's just back up and listen to the question again. Let me frame it this way, "What *worth* is a child?"

That doesn't sound much better, pastor. You need to quit talking.

Okay. What does a child offer to the greater community as far as how much that child can work, how much that child can contribute and what that child can produce? See, this is where we sometimes misunderstand what Jesus is trying to get at here. He's saying, "If you want to be the greatest, you've got to first become the least. Just like this little child who can't do *anything*." See, if Jesus placed a 3 or 4 year old in their midst as an example ... at least that kid is capable of gathering sticks or sweeping the porch or any other kind of work you can give a child that age. But a kid that's just learning how to walk? That's about as far down the rung of the social ladder as you can be. And that's what Jesus wanted his disciples to see. "This little child? Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." If you can welcome someone who has nothing to contribute to the world into your midst ... if you can welcome someone into your midst without any kind of transactional expectation ... if you can welcome someone who can do nothing for you, then you're welcoming God into your midst. Can you see how scandalous this must have sounded in a world where everyone is scrambling for status and safety? If you *can* see how it applies in this time and in this place, then you have a better understanding of Jesus' upside-down kingdom than most. And that's a good thing.