

Welcome

Mark 9: 30-37

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September 20, 2009

In the gospel according to Mark, Jesus foretells of his death and resurrection three times, each another toll of the bell for Jesus in his march to Jerusalem, where he would meet his death. Last week we read the first foretelling, which focused on Jesus as the messiah, the redeemer king who must suffer, and Jesus called all followers to take up their cross and follow him.

This week we jump to the second toll of the funeral bell, the second pronouncement of Jesus' death and resurrection. But in the gospel according to Mark there are some important stories that come BETWEEN tolls of the bell, and to hear our text today we best not skip through the story.

Six days after Jesus taught to take up the cross and follow him, our text last week, he led Peter and James and John up a mountain, and became "transfigured," his clothes dazzling white, he glowed, and then two long-dead Jewish prophets appeared and talked to Jesus. It is a moment so stolen from Return of the Jedi it's not even funny, when Vader, Kenobi, and Yoda stand glowing before Luke. Then a cloud appeared in the sky, and a voice sounded, "this is my son, my beloved, listen to him!" Resurrection power. Do you hear it, do you see it? Listen to Jesus! This is the stage upon which our text today is set.

Mark 9: 30-37 (NRSV)

30They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus talks to the disciples again about death and resurrection, but they didn't understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask him. That sounds like a familiar tune for us churchgoers. We come here week after week to gather around Jesus, and he teaches us something we've heard before, he will die and he will rise again. I wonder, do we understand resurrection? Did it really happen like that? Does it really mean something for my life? Does a story about dying and rising from 2-thousand years ago have any bearing on life in the north shore, in the US, in the world? The disciples did not understand, either, and were afraid to ask him, so they were silent. The unsettling pieces in this text, when it comes to the disciples, are their misunderstanding, and their silence. In the visible presence of God, struggling with some of the same issues of God and faith and discipleship that we do, why didn't they ask Jesus?

They were silent before Jesus, it turns out, but hardly silent with each other. On the way to Galilee, on their way to Jerusalem, the disciples were arguing with one another. They were talkative with one another, engaged in dialogue and exchange with one another, but when Jesus came calling, they were again silent. Jesus asks them when they arrive in Capernaum, what was all that yammering about on the way? They were silent, says the text, for they had argued with each other who was the greatest. Now the text is quite vague about this argument about the greatest – were they arguing about the greatest disciple, the greatest prophet, the greatest football team of all time, but we do know they were arguing with each other about greatness.

They were, perhaps each in his own way, quite clear about their own conceptions of greatness, but when it came time for Jesus to talk about divine greatness, the kind that dies and rises, they were incredulous, and worst of all, silent.

The disciples in Mark are frustrating, quite often because they remind us of someone, they remind us perhaps, even of a faith community we know well. We don't understand the resurrection, and we don't want to ask too many questions, perhaps, as Kierkegaard claims, because we're afraid of the answers. "The matter is quite simple," he says, "we know very well that the minute we understand [the gospel of Jesus Christ] we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined."

We don't understand, or perhaps we pretend we don't understand, God's message in Christ's death and resurrection. But we know greatness, greatness is that famous star, that super-athlete, that genius, that renaissance man, that multi-degree woman, that millionaire, that mom with six kids who never looks phased or dirty, that dad who on top of his successes has ample time to play with his kids, that grandparent who travels the world and has no regrets. We know these kinds of greatness, we can even go so far sometimes as to worship these images of greatness, let them drive us, and measure our own greatness by how much we look like these images we revere. Christ heard the disciples talking about their measures of greatness, perhaps even their own greatness, and when he confronted them they did not know what to say for themselves, and so they stood silent.

Jesus needed a rabbi moment. He sat down, as rabbis do, and called the twelve disciples, and then spoke to them. To speak of greatness with each other is to misunderstand greatness altogether. For "whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all." The images of greatness are not those of a king or a priest or a master, but God's images of greatness are those of the servant, the nurse, the listener.

To illustrate greatness, Jesus does some experiential teaching, and takes a child and puts the child among them. Now notice the choreography here, disciples gathered around Jesus, boy outlier, boy outside the circle, then Jesus looks outside the circle, takes a child from outside the circle, and put the child inside among them. The image of greatness, here, is about reaching outside the circle, and making the invisible visible and a central focus.

Jesus takes a child and puts the child among them. There is a danger in receiving this passage we might break into (singing): "I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way." This story does not come to us in the context of a modern western culture that cherishes and focuses on the child, this is in the context of an ancient nomadic culture in which most children didn't survive, and so they were marginalized in the cultural consciousness. The children are symbolic in this passage, of the invisible people in the margins. So greatness is about turning your focus not necessarily on cute and visibly promising little children, but on everyone who is invisible – poor children, forgotten children, abuse victims...

Jesus then took the child into his own arms, saying, "whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me and the God who sent me." Welcome one such child. And don't get so caught up in the word "welcome" here to discover God's call to you today, but look at Christ's embodiment of welcome. Christ's welcome was not just a hi how are you so glad you're here. But this welcome was the most visible person in the story seeing and ushering in the most invisible person in the story, the child. Welcome one such child, see them, go out and seek them, include them in the circle, bring them into your arms, exalt them, and speak to others about the virtue of welcoming an invisible one. That is Christian welcome, not a welcome to the place inside these walls, but welcome to this place where there are no walls of status or visibility.

Menachem Schneerson, the famous Lubavitcher rabbi from Brooklyn, used to stand every week for hours as thousands of people filed by to receive his blessing or his advice about matters great and small. Once

someone asked him how he, who was in his 80s, could stand for so long without seeming to get tired. The rabbi replied, "When you're counting diamonds you don't get tired."¹

The person on the street, the stranger behind the door, even our own family member, anyone who might be invisible to us is actually a diamond, and in receiving these diamonds we are treasuring that which Christ came to reveal are God's treasures, all beloved children.

You may not understand death and resurrection, but you can serve, you can welcome a child, an invisible one, into your church, into your life. There's a bumper sticker out there, "see motorcycles," and after seeing that bumper sticker you all of a sudden really see motorcycles around, you become mindful of them. "See the invisible ones," is the message of this gospel text, don't live out of sight of people in need.² Start seeing the invisible, not because it is virtuous to do so, not so that we can congratulate ourselves on being the greatest at seeing. Start seeing the invisible because to receive the invisible one is to receive Jesus, and to receive Jesus is to receive the one who sent him.

How will we come to see the invisible? Someone put it very succinctly for me yesterday, get outside your comfort zone. I'd like to welcome you to join us next week as we enlarge the circle of this church, as we become part of the enlarged circle of the Jonquil Hotel residents, and join them for bible study and lunch and togetherness. Let's walk together beyond our walls to build relationship with other of God's beloved children.

Hear God's Word for us today, if you want to understand the resurrection, if you want to be great in God's eyes, serve, welcome a child, welcome someone invisible to you, and in so doing you welcome the God in Jesus Christ into your life, the God of resurrection power. Do you remember that we've already read together the story of Christ's resurrection in the gospel of Mark? The women carrying on to the empty tomb are met by a man who says Jesus is risen, and he is not here, go to Galilee, and there you will find him. Galilee, where Jesus does his ministry, where he seeks out the invisible and the invisible find him, where he is outside his comfort zone, where he encounters strangers, the poor, the sick, the disheartened. There you will encounter the risen Jesus, there you will come to understand, as the disciples never quite could, resurrection.

I once went to Galilee, just to listen and learn and be present. I was in a food cooperative meeting, where people gather together to buy and distribute food, and to have a community together. A guy named Derrick shared with me that he stumbled into the ministry after he got out of prison. He was poor, angry, and feeling vengeful. He walked into a cooperative meeting one Sunday, and got WELCOMED. "Well, look who came? If it isn't a child of Martha and a child of God! You're so handsome! Tell us about you. What are you good at, what do you love?" It was the kind of welcome that extinguished Derrick's darkness and brought him into the light. It was the kind of resurrection power that gets unleashed when you and I and anyone else engages in a Christ kind of welcome.

This is Mark's call to us, this is God's call to us, like a voice from the heavens, "do you hear him? Do you see him? This is my son, my beloved, listen to him!" WELCOME one such child.

¹ Joel Marcus, "Counting Diamonds," *Christian Century*, August 30, 2000. p. 861. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1995>.

² Mary Hinkle, "Seeing Things," *Christian Century*, September 6, 2003. p. 19. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2896>.