

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for 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.”

32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

36 Then 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.”

BIG IDOLATRY

I’m told that a gosling (a baby goose) has an innate desire to follow its mother. Unfortunately, the baby goose doesn’t know what its mother looks like. These young birds have fewer instincts than other birds. So, the gosling takes the first big moving thing it sees after its birth to be its mother.

Goslings have been known to attach themselves to almost anything, even large inanimate objects, like a canoe floating down the river. And in some cases they have even been known to follow a human being.

I think that we in the church often act like the confused gosling. We attach ourselves to whatever is big and moving. Indeed, we often act as if this big, moving thing is God.

The church down through the ages has been fascinated with power and size. And so instead of following Jesus we have often followed the next big thing. We have sought political power. We have sought military power. We have built big buildings and large organizations.

Unfortunately, this has led to some terrible abuses of power that have been quite unchristian. Our arguments about who is the greatest and who has the purest

theology have led to terrible abuse. We have acted like judge and jury when it came to the truth.

The sin of idolatry begins when we wrongly think that “if its big” it must come from God. Today’s lesson challenges this claim. Indeed, we learn that God’s kingdom often comes not in the things that are big and important but in the things that seem small and insignificant.

AN ARGUMENT ON THE ROAD

The disciples while they were on the road with Jesus argued among themselves. They wanted to know who would be the greatest.

They wanted to know who would be in charge when King Jesus kicked the Romans out and restored Israel to her former glory. You see the disciples still thought that the kingdom of God would be a really big thing; a kingdom built on power and might.

What’s amazing about this, of course, is that Jesus had just told them that the kingdom would come through the unlikely route of sacrifice and suffering. The only way to God’s kingdom would be by way of a cross.

But, the disciples, like the misguided gosling had already attached themselves to something else, something big and grand.

MISUNDERSTANDING AND FEAR

When Jesus told the disciples for the second time about the cross and the resurrection, the Scripture tells us that the disciples had two reactions.

First, they did not understand what he was saying. And second, they were afraid to ask him any questions.

Now why didn’t they understand? It seems to me that Jesus made himself pretty clear.

Last week we talked about the first prediction of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. In that passage we learned that Jesus told anyone who would listen about the approaching storm.

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem he would find rejection, suffering, a cross and at the end a resurrection.

Peter understood it or at least he understood enough to know that he didn't like the sound of it one little bit. So, he forcefully tried to talk Jesus out of it.

But, Jesus turned his back on Peter; called him "Satan," and told everyone who would listen that if they were going to follow him they would have to take up their own cross and follow him.

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God was not about power and success. The kingdom of God was about self-denial and service.

After that Jesus took Peter, James and John up to the top of a high mountain.

On that mountain this inner circle of disciples saw Jesus in all his glory. And he was talking with the two greatest figures in the history of God's people, Moses and Elijah.

The disciples, of course were overwhelmed by the vision and Peter suggests that they just stay up there forever.

But, then the cloud of God's presence overshadowed them, and the disciples fell flat on their face. And a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!"

In today's lesson Jesus gives his disciples an opportunity to listen to him without any distractions. He takes the disciples away from the crowds into the Galilean countryside and teaches them.

It's not a new lesson. It's the same message about betrayal, death and resurrection. But, the disciples do not understand. And they are afraid to ask any questions.

IGNORING JESUS

This phrase translated "they did not understand what he was saying" can also be translated "they ignored what he was saying." I think this translation is closer to the truth. When disciples don't like what Jesus is saying they just don't listen to Jesus. They ignore him.

I was preaching through the lectionary in my first church. We came to this section, and I preached for several Sundays on the Passion predictions.

One of my elders thought that his young, inexperienced preacher was being too negative. He took me aside and told me,

“I know that this message about suffering and the cross is in the Bible. But, you’re preaching about it too much. You need to be more positive. You’re preaching too much about suffering and the cross! The people are going to stay home.”

Now this man was very bright. He understood the Bible well and was a college professor. But, he didn’t want to hear too much about the cross. Preaching on that once a year was quite enough for him thank you very much.

And I suspect we don’t want to hear too much about the cross either.

We’re no different from those first disciples. We ignore Jesus when he says things that we don’t want to hear. We feign misunderstanding and don’t ask any questions. Maybe if we just keep quiet he won’t say anything else that will embarrass us and make us uncomfortable.

Some leaders in the church these days are quite happy to keep quiet about the cross. They are quite happy to be more “positive” and remodel the Christian faith to make it more palatable for the modern world

But, it doesn’t work that way. The cross stands at the center of the Christian faith. And ministry always takes on a cruciform shape.

We can ignore the cross. We can even preach against it.

But, the cross does not go away. The way of the cross is still the way of Jesus.

WHAT ARE YOU ARGUING ABOUT?

Jesus didn’t say anything as the disciples bantered back and forth on the road about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. But, when they came to Capernaum in the privacy of a home he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?”

And the disciples got very quiet. Have you ever asked your young children, “What were you doing?” They get real quiet, and sometimes they say, “Oh, nothing.” That’s my picture of the disciples at this point. They were like kids caught in the cookie jar.

In the presence of Jesus, the one who was willing to die for the salvation of all, the concerns of the disciples seem so petty and irrelevant. And I think that the same would be true for us.

I imagine Jesus confronting us with the same question. What are you arguing about? What's so important? And we get real quiet and answer, "Oh nothing. Move along Jesus. Nothing to see here."

Pettiness is not limited to those first disciples. We too major in minors. We say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We say that Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Son of the living God.

But, then we don't listen to him. We ignore his cruciform message and go our own way. We are distracted by many things and do not attend to the one thing that is most important. We spend our lives arguing about questions that are not really important.

TRIVIAL PURSUIT

A while back one of the most popular games was called Trivial Pursuit. Whoever knew the most about trivial matters was the winner. It unnerves me that I was very good at that game. I wondered, "Is my mind filled with the trivial, things that are not all that important?"

I sometimes wonder if the popularity of that game wasn't prophetic about all of us. We spend our lives on trivial pursuits.

We declare winners and losers. We're number one. Our team is the best. We have more than the other person because we've worked hard and deserve it. We're better than our neighbors.

Forbes magazine came out with a list of the 100 richest people in the country this week. Alas, I regret to inform you that none of us were on that list! But, we are interested in that list. Our society measures net worth in terms of dollars.

And yet, according to Jesus, God measures net worth in a different way. Net worth is measured not so much by how much we have but how much we are willing to give. Net worth is measured by our service to the least among us.

Indeed, at the end of our life what we have doesn't matter at all. Greatness is not measured by power and money in God's kingdom. All the things that charm us most are nothing in comparison to eternity.

In the end all of us are like the disciples, playing trivial pursuit and arguing about things that do not matter. And then Jesus asks us, "What are you arguing about? What's so important?"

And we have no answer. We have no idea what is important.

Jesus knows what we argue about. He has known all along. He lets us walk down that path for a while, and then he brings something into our life that makes us reconsider our arguments.

Maybe we're on the wrong path. Maybe we need to put something else first in our life.

A CHILDISH EXAMPLE

Once more Jesus patiently told his disciples what was most important. He said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all." And then Jesus gave them a living example. He took a child and had that child stand among them.

Jesus took that little child in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Those who would be great in God's kingdom are willing to put their arms around the child. What does this acted parable mean?

In Jesus' day there was no Walt Disney World. People didn't dote on their children and give them everything. On the contrary children were totally defenseless. They had no legal rights and were totally at the mercy of their parents. Children had no social standing. In fact the word for child in Aramaic (the language spoken in Jesus' day) could also be translated servant or slave.

I remember saying something irritating when I was a child, and my grandfather said to me, "In my day children were to be seen and not heard." In other words, "Shut up. I don't want to hear from you. You're not old enough to say anything of consequence." That was the viewpoint in Jesus' day. The best thing about childhood in Jesus's day was that you would grow out of it! According to the wisdom of his world children were powerless and unimportant.

But, Jesus by his action was going against the wisdom of the world. Jesus was saying in God's kingdom children are to be seen and heard. If you want to be great in God's kingdom you begin by embracing the little people.

By the way we know that the disciples still don't "get it." In the very next chapter of Mark's gospel (See Mark 10:13-16) people are bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus.

And what do the disciples do? Do they put their arms around those children? Do they make sure that those children go to the head of the line?

No, they sternly tell the people to take those screaming kids elsewhere. In their opinion Jesus is too important to be bothered by those little ones.

Once more Jesus has to rebuke his disciples. Jesus tells them, “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.” (See Mark 10:13-16)

You see children are symbolic of how we are before God. They represent our weakness, our pain, our loneliness, and our lack of understanding. The words of the old spiritual put it well, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.” That’s us.

A KINGDOM OF LOVE

When confronted with the fearful realities of life we understand how vulnerable we are. Like a child we want someone to hold us and care for us. Jesus is telling us to use those feelings to understand and be of service to others. He is telling us to reach out and touch the “children” of the world in His name.

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” In other words the kingdom of God is not about power and prestige. The kingdom of God is not about who is number one, who is the greatest. The kingdom of God is about welcoming a child into our arms. The kingdom of God is about love.

Someone once asked Mother Teresa what he could do to help the children of the world. She said simply, “Love your children.” Could it really be so simple? Can we find the presence of God and his kingdom in such a simple mundane way?

According to Jesus we can. According to Jesus we are called to put our arms around all the little ones who come into our life. And according to Jesus that compassionate hug can change everything.

I believe God loves us so much that he gives us “little ones” to hug every day. And I’m not just talking about children.

I’m talking about all those who feel overwhelmed by life. I’m talking about those who are overwhelmed by a sense of sin and failure. I’m talking about those who are broken by sickness and disease.

And the great thing about a hug is that it goes both ways. In our ministry to the little ones, we find the presence of God in our own life. We learn that God is with us too.

We might not be the best or the brightest. We might not be the greatest. We might not be number one.

But, in God's eyes we are important. According to Jesus the kingdom comes first to those of us who are vulnerable and overwhelmed by the problems of life.

That's good news for small people. That's good news for you and for me.

Amen.