

“Afraid to Ask Any Questions”

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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.”

STUPID QUESTIONS

“There are no stupid questions.”

That’s what they say.

Until...you ask a stupid question!

I’ve asked some stupid questions in my day.

And I’ve paid the price.

People look at you funny.

What’s wrong with this guy?

Ask that stupid question,
and you want to crawl under a rock.

It takes courage to raise our hand
and tell the teacher,
“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about!”

We don’t do that very often.

First, we are afraid of what others might say.
And, second, we’re also afraid that our question might let the teacher know
that we’ve been lazy students.

We have several teachers in our congregation,
and I’ll bet every one of them will tell you the same thing.

Sometimes students ask questions about things
that were discussed over and over in the classroom.
But, they weren’t paying attention.

That can be extremely frustrating.

AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS

And in Mark’s gospel we learn that Jesus’ disciples were often like these
inattentive students.

Jesus said what only God could say.
He did what only God could do.

But, the disciples don’t understand what it all means.
And they are afraid to ask questions.

For example, in the fourth chapter of Mark (4:35-41),
the disciples find themselves in a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat.

The disciples awaken Jesus and ask,
“Don’t you care that we’re about to drown?”

So, Jesus stills the storm.

And then he turns to the disciples and says,
“Why are you so afraid?
Do you still have no faith?”

The disciples didn't know what to say.
They had lots of questions,
like, “Who is this guy?”
and “Why do even the wind and the waves obey him?”

But they didn't ask Jesus.
They're too afraid.
In fact, they were more than afraid.
The Bible tells us they were “terrified”.

They ask each other about Jesus,
but they don't ask Jesus directly.

PREVIOUS PASSION PREDICTIONS

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today,
we have the story of the Transfiguration.
Peter, James and John see the glory of God on the mountaintop.

And the voice from heaven tells these disciples
that they need to be better students.
“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.
Listen to him.”

What did God want the disciples to hear?
In what area were they not listening to Jesus?

I think it had to do with Jesus' death and resurrection.

You'll remember that Jesus made his first Passion prediction in the lesson
we studied last week.
Jesus asked the disciples,
“Who do you say that I am?”

Peter said, “You're the Messiah.”
Jesus told them, “Don't tell anyone”.

And then Jesus began to speak openly about his death and resurrection, not only to the disciples but also to the crowd.

Peter thought that was a bad idea.
And he took Jesus aside and rebuked him.

But, Jesus rebuked Peter
and spelled out the cost of discipleship.
Self-sacrifice was a part of the plan, not only for him but also for them.

Well, after the voice from heaven told the disciples to listen to Jesus, this inner circle of disciples made their way down the mountain of Transfiguration.

And Jesus makes his second Passion prediction.
He tells Peter, James and John them about his suffering, death and resurrection.

The message is exactly the same as the message we heard last week.

Did the disciples discuss this with Jesus?
Did they voice any questions?
Nope.

The Bible tells us that the disciples kept the matter to themselves, wondering, "What did Jesus mean when he talked about rising from the dead?
We never heard that one before.

How soon some students forget!
They had just heard about it on the way to Caesarea Philippi.

They didn't ask Jesus what it meant then
And they don't ask now.

A DEMON POSSESSED BOY

In the next scene, Jesus comes upon the other disciples, those that had stayed behind at the foot of the mountain.

They had tried to heal a demon possessed boy.

But, they weren't having any luck.

After some discussion with the father,
Jesus healed the boy.

And later the disciples do finally ask Jesus a question.

Why couldn't they drive out the demon?

Jesus suggested that some demons can only be dispatched with prayer
and supplication.

THIRD PASSION PREDICTION

And then Jesus speaks once again about his death and resurrection.

This is the third prediction of the Passion in Mark's gospel.

Surely all the disciples should all understand what Jesus is talking about
now.

Like the teacher who has gone over the material for the upcoming test over
and over again,
the disciples have been told again and again about what was to happen.

And they were told what quite plainly what those events would mean for the
Kingdom of God.

Sacrifice and service would be the hallmarks of those who followed Jesus.

But, they still had questions.
Still didn't understand.
Still afraid to ask Jesus any questions.

You have to wonder,

What was going on with these disciples?
Why couldn't they understand?

Why couldn't they just listen to Jesus?
What he said was plain enough, right?

And if they didn't understand why wouldn't they ask Jesus any questions?

In our lesson for today we learn that Jesus took his disciples out into the countryside of Galilee so that he could go over this important teaching about his Passion without any distractions.

The disciples wouldn't have to worry about public perception.

They could learn and ask questions without fear of what someone might say. (9:30-31a)

But, apparently going on retreat did not help their learning curve.

When Jesus went over the story of his death and resurrection for the third time,
the disciples still didn't understand.

And they were still afraid to ask questions.

THE FEAR OF GOD

Students sometimes have a learning disability.

Maybe they have dyslexia
and it's hard for them to read.
Maybe they have a hard time understanding mathematical concepts.

But, the greatest hindrance to learning is fear.

And you may have noticed that in all these passages, the disciples can't learn and won't ask questions because they are afraid.

What is this fear that keeps them from learning?

Maybe, to a certain extent they were afraid of Jesus.

The mighty acts of God in Christ were awe inspiring.

When Jesus did what only God could do
...like stilling the storm or raising the dead

or healing a man born blind...
the disciples were amazed, but also filled with fear.

Throughout the Bible, the presence of the Divine is associated with this holy fear.

God was in Christ and that glory was hard to bear.

But, I think there's more to the disciples' fear than just the Divine presence in Jesus.

A FEARFUL MESSAGE

I think the disciples were afraid of Jesus' message.
What Jesus said about the Kingdom of God didn't fit with what they wanted.

Last week we talked about how Peter rejected the message of the cross and the resurrection. He was afraid of the message about Jesus' death and resurrection. It didn't fit with what he believed.

This week, even after an appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain-top and even after hearing a voice from heaven, nothing has really changed.

The disciples are still afraid of the message that Jesus brings.

And that fear keeps them from understanding,
and it keeps them from asking any questions.

We do the same thing.

Recently my doctor scheduled some medical tests.
But, I kept putting off getting the tests done.

Do you know why?
I was afraid of what I might learn!

(By the way, I did get the test and the news was good. But, my fear kept me from learning that good news for several months.)

I think the same thing is going on with the disciples.

They don't have a learning disability.
They are afraid of what they might learn.

That's still true.
If Jesus tells us something
that we don't want to hear, we just ignore it.

We say, "Oh that doctrine is too hard
or too controversial.
We can't talk about justice issues in the church.
That can cause too much trouble."

And so we don't learn what Jesus wants to teach us.
And we don't ask any questions.

In the long run what Jesus has to tell us is gospel, good news.

But, as it was with me and my medical tests,
we sometimes miss the good news because we are afraid of the potential
bad news.

TELLING THE STORY OF SALVATION OUR WAY

In addition to living by fear instead of faith,
we also substitute our own story of salvation
instead of listening to what Jesus has to say.

It's amazing.
Jesus tells his disciples over and over again
that his kingdom will be about a cross and a resurrection.

So what do the disciples talk about
when they think Jesus isn't listening as they walk down the road?

Who among us will be the greatest when we bring in this new kingdom?

Who will have the best job in the new administration when Jesus comes to
power?

It sort of sounds like the struggle that goes on when someone is elected president. Folks jockey for position. They want to get close to the one in power.

It's not about sacrifice and service.

It's about winning.

It's about being the greatest.

It's about power and privilege.

The disciples hadn't heard a word Jesus said.

It wasn't because they needed hearing aids.

It was because they had their own agenda and they were imposing that agenda on Jesus.

We also do this.

But, it's hard for us to recognize it.

We think that our interpretation of Jesus is free from self-interest.

We think that we don't need to ask Jesus any questions because we are just telling the simple gospel truth.

It's sort of like our political battles.

We look at any issue through the lens of what we already believe as a Democrat or a Republican or an independent.

And that distorts our perception.

We would like to think that there's a great wall between politics and faith.

But, that's not true.

From the very beginning, people have tried to use the Christian faith to their own advantage.

Instead of listening to Jesus, they talk behind his back.

They suggest that the real issue is power and privilege and who has God on their “side”.

A HEROIC JESUS

Let me give you an example from history.

When the Nazis took over in Germany, there was a call to remake the church to support the ambitions of the state. Dr. Reinhold Krause made these suggestions for this so called German Christian movement.

The New Testament is to be purged of all superstitious passages, including the whole theology of the Rabbi Paul with its ideas of scapegoats and its sense of inferiority.

An exaggerated view of the Crucified was to be avoided and a “heroic” Jesus proclaimed.

What do you get when you take away the cross and forgiveness and a sense of our own sinfulness and replace that with a heroic Christ?

In this case you get a “church” that is complicit with the Nazis.

There was a reason that Jesus called Peter Satan when he rejected the message of the cross and the resurrection.

Here we have a powerful example of what can happen when we do that.

Tyrants are empowered and evil flourishes when disciples argue about who’s the greatest behind Jesus’ back.

THE MEASURE OF GREATNESS

The disciples may have thought that Jesus didn’t hear their argument about power and privilege.

But, they were wrong.

Jesus did hear.

The disciples might have been afraid to ask any questions.

But, Jesus was not afraid to ask them a question.

“So, what were you guys arguing about on the way?

The disciples responded,
“I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate me.”

Actually, their answer was just a guilty silence.

They knew what they were arguing about.

And they also knew very well that their argument about greatness did not square with what Jesus had been saying about a cross and a resurrection.

How could they argue about power and privilege when Jesus continued to talk about sacrifice and service?

I guess you could ask us the same question.
Why do we continue to argue about greatness and use religion to obtain power and privilege?

Jesus has told us over and over again that this is not the gospel. If we would only ask questions of Jesus, we would learn.

But, we're afraid.
We don't want to know the answer.

One footnote.

Believe it or not,
this issue will come up again.

In the tenth chapter of Mark,
Jesus once again makes a prediction about his suffering, crucifixion and resurrection.

And you'll never guess what happens next.
James and John come to Jesus
(while all the other disciples are sleeping
or out of earshot) and ask,

“Can we be on your right and left in glory?”

In other words, can we be vice president and secretary of state when you defeat the Romans and bring in a new political kingdom?

Can you make us great again?

The disciples will never learn to ask the right questions until they have experienced the cross and the resurrection for themselves.

The cross and resurrection will be for them the death of the old way of life and the resurrection of a new life.

But, in today's lesson Jesus patiently tries to help the disciples ask the right question.
He once again describes true greatness.

“Whoever wants to be first
must be last of all and servant of all.”

And then Jesus gives them an example that service.
He takes a small child in his arms and says,

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

In Jesus' day children weren't doted on like they are in our day and time.

Children were considered to be a liability.
They were to be seen and not heard.

The best thing you could say about childhood in Jesus' day was that one day
they would grow out of it.

The distinguishing characteristic of children in those days was that they were very vulnerable.

They had no rights.
There was no one to take their side.

Jesus said,
“Do you want to be great?”

Put your arms around those that are vulnerable.
Have compassion on those who have no advocate.
Welcome these little ones into your life.

When you do that, you not only welcome me.
You welcome the one who sent me.”

To say it another way,
We get close to Greatness when we welcome little ones into our life.
We meet the Savior when we welcome those who need us most.

I wonder.
Are we like the disciples?
Are we afraid to ask Jesus any questions?

Maybe we are we afraid of what he might say?
Maybe we are we afraid that his message
might challenge some of our cherished beliefs?

It's not easy to be on the road with Jesus.
That road often does lead to the death of what we want to believe.

But, that road also leads to resurrection.

Lord, help us ask the right questions.
And help us hear the answers.

Amen.