

“The Greatest”

Mark 9:30-37

20 September 2009

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They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 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.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

Prayer.

Have you ever experienced

A friend or family member

Making a decision that appears

Completely foolish?

Of course you have.

Likewise, I’m sure none of us have been accused of making a wrong choice!

The decision may be illogical,

Something less than the best possible choice,

Or appear to be just plain dumb.

Sometimes it can be explained away as being uninformed;

The person didn’t have all the necessary information to make the best possible choice.

Other times it can be justified as being misinformed;

The person received the wrong information, and therefore, their choice was flawed.

But this doesn’t explain why people drink and drive,

invest in high risk stocks,

or quit perfectly good jobs.

Why do good people make foolish decisions?

The Gospel of Mark is like a multiple-decker sandwich.

Immediately preceding our lection for this morning

Jesus, James, John, and Peter are coming down the mountain,

Returning from the Transfiguration,

To find the remaining disciples in the middle of a crowd

and in a pickle.

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While Jesus and company had been away on the mountain
The other disciples had come across a father and his son with a spirit.
The spirit would seize the boy, throw him to the ground, grind his teeth, make him rigid, and
make him foam from the mouth.¹
The father brought his son,
and a crowd of sympathetic witnesses (including some scribes) to the disciples
And asked that his son be healed.
They failed.
What ever they tried, they failed.
And the crowd was probably ready to chase this circus out of town
When down the mountain and into the crowd walks Jesus.
The crowd parts and the father pleads his case.
To which Jesus says, “If you are able!- All things can be done for one who believes.”²
The father cries, “I believe; help my unbelief!”
Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and the boy is healed.
Probably the father and the crowd went ecstatic.
One can just imagine the look on the disciples faces.
Oh, my goodness.
Jesus just made us look like fool in front of hundreds.
Behind closed doors they ask, “Why could we not cast it out?”
His answer?
“This can come out only through prayer.”³

This is a vitally important prelude to our lesson for today,
Because it sets the stage for what is set into motion.
Professor Alyce McKenzie⁴ from Perkins School of Theology correctly identifies the
environment:
The disciples were filled with Fear, that they had fallen in Jesus’ estimation.
The disciples were Insecure at their failure to heal the boy.
The disciples were resentful towards one another as Jesus chastises them.
And the disciples were eager to compete to regain his approval.
Fear, Insecurity, Resentment, and Eagerness;
And the first letter of each spells FIRE.
These are the four essential social realities at play between Jesus and his disciples
As they travel through Galilee and he stops to teach.
Understanding this social and cultural environment
Is essential to understanding our Gospel for today.
Their burning question wasn’t “How can I better understand Jesus and live according to his
will?”
Rather, it was “How can I be the greatest?”

¹ Mark 9:14-29

² Mark 9:23-24

³ Mark 9:29

⁴ Professor McKenzie’s excellent work can be found at:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/20/2009#

This social reality helps explain why the disciples make such a poor decision to promote themselves, instead of being Christ's servants.

So Jesus begins with one of many predictions:

I'm going to be betrayed, suffer, die, and be raised from the dead after three days.

I don't think they even heard him talking.

It was only years later when the gospel author probably remembered,

"Oh yes, Jesus did tell us many times that he would suffer, die, and be resurrected, and one of those times was right after the Transfiguration and healing the spirit filled boy."

But at that time,

in this instance,

the disciples are afraid, insecure, resentful, and eager to get back into Jesus' good grace.

While Jesus is talking, they are thinking, "How can I be the greatest?"

Quarrel amongst yourselves.

Oh, yes; this is exactly what they did.

Jesus asks, "What are you arguing about on the way?"⁵

Nothing. Or, so they claimed.

They don't tell him, but, yet, he knows.

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

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."⁶

We all have probably heard sermons on this text

That make the point we have to become children to be great:

Encouraging one to be focused on our inward lives,

On becoming more pure,

More innocent,

More humble,

More spontaneous,

More trusting.⁷

It turns out that to be great is to not to be focused inward,

But to be focused outward:

In welcoming the last, the lost, the least;

In welcoming those not viewed as great by the culture;

In welcoming the child, the orphan, the widow, the prisoner, the sick, diseased, or ill;

In welcoming not just those within our circle of safe family and friend, but to our unfamiliar neighbor, some of whom live only mere yards from our own front door.

To paraphrase Jesus,

'When you've done it for the least of these, you've done it for me.'

'When ever you've placed the needs of others in need or want first, and your needs last, then you will be my greatest disciple.'

It was a poor choice for the disciples to be so egoistically self-promoting.

⁵ Mark 9:33b

⁶ Mark 9:35 & 37

⁷ *ibid.*, McKenzie.

And it has led many of us scratching our head asking, “how can they be so dimwitted?”
But go easy on them.
They have feet of clay,
Just as you and I.
The message that we can take away from today’s Gospel
Is the challenge to turn our lives inside out.
The inward, self-focused, self-promotion, self-centered, unexamined life is one that leads to
decay and death.
Discipleship,
Learning about Jesus and following his will,
Is a life turned outward,
Living as a servant to others,
As a servant to the poor, the last, the lost, the least,
Meeting their needs first,
Placing our needs last.
That, my friends, is a life worth living.
That, my beloved, is a life that leads to Christ.
Amen.