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Pentecost 18 B, September 22, 2024

Speaking truth to power and hope to the powerless

Reed: Mark 9:30–37 and/or memorize: Mark 9:35

We're doing a lot of traveling through the land in the Gospel of Mark, so let's get this straight. Jesus and His disciples were making their way to Capernaum. As they were walking, three things happened: first, Jesus told His disciples something that totally shattered them. For the second time, He told them that things were going downhill in a big hurry, that He would be betrayed, killed, but three days later, He would rise again from the dead. That's the first big thing.

Second, that the disciples didn't understand what in the world He meant by that, but they were afraid to ask Him. What we heard in our Gospel reading is called a passion prediction. This is the second of three that Mark gives us. Every time Jesus talks about this, the disciples don't like it.

It kind of makes sense that the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus about what he meant. There were times when they understood Jesus and there were times when He seemed to be speaking a different language. This was one of the latter times. They weren't able to grasp what He was trying to teach them. I suspect there was also one other reason for them being afraid to ask Him. They were scared. They were scared about what betrayal and killing and rising might mean for them.

Finally, the disciples did what most of us do, when we are afraid, especially when we're facing change. They changed the subject and began to argue with each other about which one of them was going to be the greatest of all disciples. They didn't understand, and perhaps didn't want to understand, what Jesus was talking about, so they talked about something different.

They assumed, because this is what Judaism taught, that because Jesus was the Messiah he was about to inaugurate a whole new kingdom. They felt like they were getting in right at the start, so they would be able to go through the door to get all the great positions that would be opened up in this new kingdom.

Therefore, they were jousting with one another about who is going to be the greatest, the top dog, the big kahuna. There were lots of implications about what that would mean. In this season of elections, you might say they were wondering, who's polling numbers were going up and whose numbers were going down?

I don't think we can really blame them. There are probably not many of us here who haven't, at one time or the other, dreamed of a little fame, recognition, or even glory. Fantasies like this are a good way to get our minds off of other, more difficult subjects.

The story is told of a young man who was learning to play the guitar. He probably knew about four chords at this point. He and his band buddies attended a concert. His bandmates, who also only knew about four chords, and maybe three songs, as did he, were sitting in the front row, off to the side, watching the roadies set up.

It looked to him like they were missing one guitarist, and he began to dream that maybe, just maybe, they would have to call out for somebody in the audience to take the missing guitarist's place. He thought about the fact that this would really move him up the scale of importance at his high school, if they called him up.

He would no longer just be the skinny kid, yeah, just try to imagine that, the skinny kid with a tuba and an out of tune guitar. He would've been on the stage with a national recording artist. Sadly, for him, but thankfully for the audience, the guitarist arrived, and our young friend was spared the humiliation.

That may seem a little bit far-fetched, but have we not all had, at some time, that moment of thinking that we might be the star discovered somewhere. Isn't that in fact what we see on many reality shows. Somebody hoping that this will be their breakthrough chance to reach real fame. Isn't it there ultimate hope that they will do something to gain attention; to show that they are the greatest.

I'm just imagining that you're daydreaming about being famous like that, or rich or the best and someone asks you what you're thinking about. They might say, "A penny for your thoughts?" Your response might just be, "Oh nothing just daydreaming." You might be embarrassed to tell the truth. It appears this was the case for the disciples, and when Jesus asked them what they were chatting about which, by the way the Gospel says they were arguing about, they were silent.

Jesus decided they needed a little lesson. Mark tells us He called the 12 together and taught them a lesson that He had been trying to teach them for some time: if you want to be first, then you have to be last of all, and servant of all.

No doubt, that was not what they wanted to hear from Jesus. And I think their silence is part of that. I also suspect they were embarrassed to say to Him that they were arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the new kingdom. It's a tough lesson for them, and us, to learn, so Jesus decided that an object lesson was in order.

He took a little child and stood them in their midst. It wouldn't matter whether it was a boy or a girl because all children were viewed in the same way. They were nothing except cheap labor. He told them that whoever welcomes one such child in His name welcomes Him, and whoever welcomes Him actually, is welcoming the Father who sent Him.

It may appear like Jesus has given up, trying to teach the disciples and changes the subject, but I don't think He really did. When you think about who in the ancient world, and probably for many people in our world also, have the least amount of power.

Children in those days got little respect, for the most part they didn't count. They had no legal status and could produce very little. In short, children are on the bottom rung of society, but this was not the case for Jesus and His upside-down world. We know the disciples didn't quite catch on to this lesson, because in Mark 10, there's another incident with children, but that's for another day.

So, Jesus puts one little child, the least of all in society, in the midst of the disciples, and says, in effect, the only way you can have any importance in the Kingdom of God is to care for, welcome, and serve those who are least of all. Jesus is saying the only way that the disciples can be reckoned as having any status whatsoever is for them to serve the powerless.

That is the task of the servant leader. It is a theme we hear over and over again in the Gospels, the first must be last of all and the servants of all; the last will be first and the first shall be last.

We've heard it over and over from Jesus, but we also have heard, over and over in our daily lives, the exact opposite: the first shall be first, the powerful shall have power over those who have less power. And it is very telling that we struggle with this command that Jesus gives us to put others before ourselves.

Perhaps it is difficult to remember that the call to discipleship means putting our own ambitions in perspective, except for the ambition to care for those who are least of all, or unable to care for themselves; who slipped through the cracks. Jesus is constantly

challenging us disciples to not place the powerful first, but rather to serve the least powerful, especially women and children.

I have to admit that this goes against the grain. Sometimes, or should I say often, people can come up with all sorts of reasons why some of those powerless ones have more power than they appear to have. What they need to do is pull themselves up by their bootstraps instead of having others do for them.

I get it. There may be people who take advantage; who are truly fully capable. They may have their hands out and be taking advantage of us. Jesus helps us to discern that and he's not talking about them. He is talking about the truly powerless.

It's an interesting thing in my mind that we often think of ourselves as among the less powerful. Yet, if we first look at ourselves and recognize the power that each of us has, we can come to a different decision. **God has blessed us mightily, and with that blessing comes responsibility, according to Jesus.**

As Americans, we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are among the powerless, when, in comparison to most of the world, we are the powerful. We have more resources than most others. **If we see our blessings differently, that we have them to help others, we can accept our mission to serve others out of the love of Jesus.**

That's exactly what "Everyday Disciples, Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" do, because they know they are the beloved of Jesus.

Count me in: How will you use your blessings to help those in need?