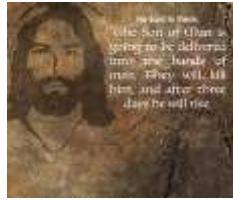


Sunday Lesson – September 19, 2021

GOSPEL: Mark 9: 30-37

“So You Want First Place?”



Context

“Mark 9:30-37 occurs within the second major section of Mark (8:22-10:52), which contains a threefold pattern that appears three times. Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34), the disciples don’t understand (8:32-33; 9:32; 10:35-41), and Jesus then gives the disciples further teachings (8:34-9:1; 9:33-50; 10:42-45).

In the narrative arc of Mark’s gospel, 9:30-37 furthers the revelation of Jesus’ identity, using the title “Son of Man” (Daniel 7:13) There can be no doubt by now in Mark’s gospel that Jesus is no ordinary rabbi. Yet still the disciples are confused.

Here it will help to remember that this entire section in Mark’s gospel is framed at the beginning and end by accounts of blind people who are given sight (8:22-26, 10:46-52). This stark image of going from blindness to sight is a big literary clue. As the blind man is given sight, however gradually, so the disciples, who are blind to Jesus’ mission and identity, are given sight, albeit gradually.

Knowing and not knowing, understanding and not understanding are woven throughout chapters 8 and 9 of Mark: from Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:27) to the transfiguration (9:1-13) to Jesus explaining yet again what lies ahead for the Son of Man (9:31).” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-mark-930-37-2)*

Insight

“Jesus’ powerful paradox precludes personal pride. Greatness in God’s kingdom isn’t about being first. In fact, it isn’t even about you. **If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very**

last, and the servant of all. There’s no “half-way” down in humility. Who’s the boss? Not you. You’re not even middle management. You’re the last. You’re the servant of all. Jesus said it twice so we’d hear it twice – Want to be first? You’re last **OF ALL** and you’re servant **OF ALL**. Hold on – this seems to echo some of Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount. Remember how he said our relationships with others should go? When I see those opportunities – even with my “enemies,” my question is always, “*How can I be Christ to this person?*”

Humbly serve and joyfully give of yourself. Not because it will save you, but because you have been saved and set free in Christ. You can love with no thought of what you’ll get in return, because that’s exactly how Jesus has loved you. You can give of yourself with no thought of reaping some benefit, because you’ve received an undeserved gift beyond comprehension – forgiveness for your sins and life forever in heaven. Greatness in God’s kingdom is not about advancement of self. It’s about dying to self, and being raised to new life with your Savior Jesus. Looking for greatness? Look to Jesus. He’s set you free from sin. He’s set you free to love. He’s set you free...to be great!” *(Excerpts from manhattanhope.com/sermons/great-expectations-mark-930-37)*

Gospel Reading

“Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn’t want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, “The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive.” They didn’t know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, “What were you discussing on the road?” The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest. He sat down and summoned the Twelve. “So you want first

place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.” He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, “Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.” The Message

What It Could Mean?

“In case Mark’s audience has failed as miserably as the Twelve to get the point, the same scheme unfolds in Chapter 10: prediction (verses 33-34), misunderstanding (verses 35-39a), readjustment (verses 39b-45).

Why this repetition? Two reasons. First: Discipleship in Mark is hard to accept. Second: In this Gospel Jesus’ closest followers are so dense that light bends around them. Both themes pervade Mark 9:30-37.

“But they did not understand [Jesus’] saying [in 9:31], and they were afraid to ask him” (9:32). What’s not to understand? Jesus has already said much the same in 8:33-38. But the Twelve in Mark’s Gospel never understand Jesus (4:13; 6:52; 8:17, 21). In fact, the last words uttered by Peter, last of the twelve hangers-on, is, “I neither know nor understand what you mean” (14:66). Those with faith in Jesus have nothing to fear (4:40-41; 5:33-34, 36), but not once does Mark ever attribute faith to the Twelve (compare the usually nameless nobodies in 2:5; 5:34; 9:24; 10:52).

Immediately after Jesus has reminded them of his impending humiliation, his followers are shamed to silence: they’ve been quarreling over which of them is tops in their own pecking order (9:33-34). Given antiquity’s preoccupation with social status—not so very distant from our own—that debate is predictable. But in Mark’s context, it’s nonsensical, since Jesus is superior to them all. Disregarding the General, these foot soldiers bicker over their respective ranks.

Like self-sacrifice for the gospel’s sake in 8:34-35, these qualifications for acceptance in 9:37 are important, steering

interpretation away from sentimentality: the “last of all and servant of all” (verse 35) is received “in my name” as a disciple of Jesus who evinces the teacher’s own belittlement by betrayal (9:31). Welcoming such an ambassador of Jesus is tantamount to receiving Jesus, who himself is a mediating emissary of the one who has sent him (9:37; see also Matthew 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 12:44-45; 13:20).

Children will return in Mark as exemplary of discipleship (10:13-16), but the stress in 9:33-37 is different. Here Mark concentrates our attention, not on the child’s receptivity (compare 10:15), but on the necessity of a disciple’s welcoming other children in Jesus’ name. That’s the positive counterpoint of both Jesus’ rejection, emphasized in 9:31, and the Twelve’s aspersions cast on one another. In other words, the top-to-bottom reversal of rank in 9:35 realigns how listeners should receive those whom they have mistakenly regarded as beneath them (9:34, 36-37): a detail reiterated in 9:38-41 and developed in next Sunday’s Gospel lection.” (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by C. Clifton Black*)

Readings for Further Study

- [1 Corinthians 15:9/Ephesians 3:8/1 Timothy 1: 15](#) *Apostle Paul: “I am the least of the apostles”*
- [Galatians 5:13/1 Peter 4: 10 & 11](#) *“through love serve one another”*

Thought for the Day

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, its thinking of yourself less.” ~ C. S. Lewis

A Prayer

O Father, give us the humility which realizes its ignorance, admits its mistakes, recognizes its need, welcomes advice, accepts rebuke. Help us always to praise rather than to criticize, to sympathize rather than to discourage, to build rather than to destroy, and to think of people at their best rather than at their worst. This we ask for thy name’s sake. **Amen.**