

10, July 4,
Jesus Way, Not Our Way...

Mark 9: 30 – 37

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE

- Last week we heard about a blind man receiving his sight and following Jesus on the way, code for becoming a disciple of Jesus. Today we explore what it means to be a disciple of Jesus- what Jesus way is.
- In the gospel of Mark, Jesus teaches on three separate occasions that he will die and will rise again. Today's reading is the second occasion. The whole of "Jesus way" is epitomised in his dying and rising.
- The disciples do not understand, and they're afraid to ask- they want to know and they don't want to know. Instead, they turn to a favorite, familiar human activity, they argue about which of them is greater than the others.
- Jesus uses this as a teaching moment about what is truly great. And he uses a child as an object lesson.
- To understand the point he is making we have to try to lay aside our 21st century concepts of children - as darling, beloved, precious beings to be coddled and doted on.
- In Jesus day, a child had no rights, no personhood, no status -many children did not live beyond 5 years of age- they were simply not yet people. They were absolutely the last and least in society.
- To grasp some of the shock value of Jesus actions, we need to understand that a child was at the bottom of the heap.

Let us listen for the Word of God in <Mark's Gospel 9: 30 -37

SERMON

A young couple came into the church office to fill out a pre-marriage questionnaire form. The young man, had never talked to a pastor before, and he was quite nervous.

So when they came to the question, "Are you entering this marriage of your own free will?" there was a long pause.

Finally, the girl looked over at the apprehensive young man and said, "Put down yes".

We chuckle over couple power struggles – it kind of rings true – how power issues are at the heart of human relationships- from the intimate to the social- political.

At the G20 summit this last week in Toronto the most powerful people in the world were gathered together, and hundreds came armed and dressed in black, with the intention of making a dent of some kind in that power.

However ineffective the methods, that was their apparent intention. Their violence was met with police violence and many surrounding protestors were affected.

It's the way the world works- when people feel disempowered, they often resort to violence; and those who are powerful often maintain their power through violence. And there is always collateral damage- the ordinary person is impacted.

Jesus came to inaugurate and to show us a different way. For this world of violence to change, it seems imperative that we understand his message of what it means to be truly great.

His message is, however, a mystery, - hard to grasp! He tells us that to be great we must be a servant of all, and he holds a child, a nobody, in his arms- saying in effect, "This is greatness"

And like the disciples, some of us may be left scratching our heads!.- it's like someone from another culture, tells us a joke- and we don't get it.

I had a friend from Slovakia who would tell me these Eastern European jokes and I'd look at him blankly and he'd have to explain- at which point, of course, they weren't funny at all.

There was a series apparently of the "smallest" jokes- like Question: what's the smallest airport?
Answer: Red Square. (That's supposed to be funny)

And he'd have to explain that there were these students who'd flown a two-seater plane over the Berlin wall, through Soviet airspace, undetected, all the way to Red Square where they landed- just as a prank.

Or QUESTION: which country has the smallest recipe book? ANSWER: Romania (and I was supposed to know that the concept of a recipe book in Romania was absurd- like who had FOOD to cook?)

The recipe book was so small there was only one recipe, and it read, "step one, steal a chicken...."

Isn't the bible like that, everything seems to need to be explained- we're in another land, another mindset, we're into God think, not people think. And here when Jesus teaches about greatness, we're asked to think the opposite, to think small, to think poor, to think weak.

To think "Jesus with a child in his arms". It's a mystery. I'll tell you a joke that I've told before but it kind of captures what this mystery is about:

Three teenage girls are driving along, they have a terrible accident, die and go to heaven.

St. Peter meets them at the gates, and says "Welcome to Heaven. There is only one rule here - don't step on the ducks. Don't bother them, just leave them alone. If you do bother them in any way you will be handcuffed to the ugliest person in Heaven for all eternity."

The first teen thinks this is so funny, she falls over backwards laughing, and "QUACK!" yep, she steps on a duck. So she's handcuffed to the ugliest person in heaven.

The other two teens walk around Heaven teasing and tormenting their unlucky friend. Till the second teen steps on a duck too. She's handcuffed to the second ugliest person in Heaven.

The two girls sit moping at the fact that they're chained to these people for all eternity. The next day they see the third teen, and she is handcuffed to the most gorgeous guy they've ever seen.

She sees the question in their eyes, shrugs and says, "He stepped on a duck."

There's something in here of the truth that Jesus is trying to teach- that in heaven, in the kingdom of God, the ugly ones- (in common teenage thinking those would be the ones at the bottom of the heap) the cast aside, shunned, neglected, ignored- the ugly ones are actually blessed-

God has a way of bringing them to the top of the heap. God's ways are not our ways, the psalmist says.

Jesus had a special love for the "ugly", the downtrodden, the cast aside of the world. For their sake, he himself becomes "ugly," condemned, cast aside.

I think of the scene where Jesus hangs in agony on the cross, barely recognizable as a human being -his body torn, bleeding and broken. Beside him are two thieves, also bleeding and broken, though according to the justice of the day they supposedly got what they deserved.

And one thief turns to him and says "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom". And Jesus responds, "Today you will be with me in paradise"

Jesus doesn't exactly handcuff himself to the thief, but they're nevertheless bound together in suffering- and as Jesus enters paradise, he will take with him this suffering man beside him and all the cast aside ones at the bottom of the heap.

Jesus comes alongside every small, hurting, lost, struggling, cast aside person, so that he may take them with him where he goes.

And he teaches his followers this way of bringing in the kingdom, not through seeking personal greatness, but by diminishing ourselves and lifting others up.

Jesus is teaching his disciples so that they can teach others, so they can' influence others to follow in Jesus way- and how to influence others in Jesus way is counterintuitive- it's NOT through wielding power.

My sabbatical earlier this year took me to Pendle Hill, the Quaker centre in Pennsylvania. I experienced there a marvelous Quaker practice called the "clearness committee". The job of the committee was to help a person to become clear on an issue.

There was one very important rule. The committee members were not allowed to give advice, or opinions. They could only ask questions.

And not leading questions; only open questions, evoking questions. You couldn't say, "don't you think that..?" but "what do you think about..?" questions designed to help the person come to their own deeper understanding of the issues.

Being on the receiving end was amazing. I found myself in a safe, respectful, deeply caring space. I did not need to be defensive, or please others, and the openness truly made space for the Spirit of God.

And it is the Spirit of God that moves us to faith and into faithful living, not any words of persuasion or argument, and certainly not pressure or force.

It's the hardest thing to do, not to try to fix someone else's problems. To approach the other not from a position of power, of knowing it all, but from a place where we recognize our own poverty. But it is this attitude of humility that in the end empowers another to change.

The same principle applies to our giving material goods. Our culture teaches us to think: I have much, therefore I should give; I am rich, therefore I should share. Which is ethically true...

But strangely, statistics indicate that those who have more give away proportionately less than those who don't have so much.

Having more doesn't make us generous. what makes us generous is recognizing that what we have is gift- it's an attitude of humility rather than a sense of our greatness that makes us generous.

Jesus as portrayed in the gospel of Mark does not think of his life as his own- his life belongs to God, it's all gift, -and he pours himself out in serving God's purposes, and calls us to do the same..

When we are willing to die, to let go of the world's idea of greatness, when in humility we acknowledge our own weakness, poverty, we allow GOD to do far MORE through us than WE could do, were we to serve out of our strength and our riches. This is a mystery.

You may remember a documentary on CBC about a Canadian woman Nicole Pageau, who did wonderful work with widows in Ruanda.

Nicole herself is a widow. Her personal poverty, emptiness, resonated with the emptiness of those Ruandan women, who'd lost every single person that they loved. Husbands, children, siblings, parents.

She went there to see what she could do. She didn't have much money, but she spent it all to buy them food. She helped them earn a living by providing outlets for their craft work here in Canada, and now she runs a charity that amongst other things funds their children to go to school.

And she says her own emptiness has been filled.

One woman, in touch with her personal poverty reached out with what she has to others who are at the bottom of the heap, God's grace has flowed through her. And she has been blessed in the process.

The mystery of Jesus taking a child in his arms is this:

As our own poverty meets the poverty of another, as we embrace those who've been cast aside, we become vessels through whom God's grace may flow.

And there is nothing greater than this.

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory, amen.