

Mark 9:30-37

9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it,

9:31 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."

9:32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them,

9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Sermon: Why Do You Want to Be So Great?

We live in a post-Easter world. The Resurrection, and all sorts of other little resurrections are now possible. Death is no longer final. And little deaths, those things that suck the marrow out of life: bad relationships, mundane office jobs, the blah-ness of everyday chores and activities – we needn't die to them either. The story of Jesus, the whole story of Jesus, the one that's still alive today, tells us about a better kind of world. And it tells us of our inherent worth and value. And it tells us that the world doesn't have to be what Caesar says it must be. We know the story. We celebrate the story. We live the story. And yet....

And yet, the story still seems incomprehensible. No matter how alive we feel, we still fear death. And we still allow ourselves, not all the time, but at least some of the time, to die to lesser things. We know the story of the cross, and even better, what's beyond that cross, and yet there is still tension, still grief, still angst, still fear, still doubt. And yes, it's nice to know there's an empty tomb, but such news doesn't always settle our anxieties about unruly supervisors, or damaged relationships, or aging parents, or sick children, or Mother Nature's storms, or uncertainty in Raleigh and Washington, or how we can put an extra zero in our retirement savings, or if we're really gonna have our fair share.

This isn't a dumping session. I'm not saying these things to make anyone feel guilty, or overwhelmed, or ashamed. In fact, quite the opposite – I would argue that feeling some, or any, or all these feelings makes us human.

I would argue that Jesus himself felt similar feelings. As a matter of fact, Jesus spent the first thirty years of his life discerning his ridiculously hard, and his ridiculously unfair calling, and even in his final hours, he asked God, “Are you sure this is what you want?”

The story of Jesus, the whole story, is a hard one to process, for anybody.

I’m telling you all this today, because I’m hoping it might give us a touch of empathy for the disciples.

At the beginning of today’s pericope, Jesus lays it all out there for the disciples. “Fellas,” he says, “You need to know that if we continue doing what we’re doing, the empire’s gonna strike back. And I’m headed to a cross. But I want you to know there’s life beyond that cross.”

Bear in mind again, that Jesus has had thirty years to reconcile his path. And you and me, we may not be experts, but we’ve heard the story enough to know that the journey to Jerusalem will bring about his demise, and that Sunday will bring untold joy. And even the first-time hearer, now nine chapters into the story, has been reminded several times of what’s to be.

But not the disciples. They hear Jesus’ words for a second time. And if we’re not careful, we’ll judge their actions harshly, and we’ll think them callous, even cold people.

But perhaps Jesus’ words sound cryptic to the disciples. Or maybe his words strike with such precision, they’re like little darts of shock, and the disciples cannot bring themselves to take the claim seriously. How might we respond to news of a loved one with a fatal diagnosis, or to

an impending rejection, or to a sweeping defeat? We might decide to stay right where we are. And we might decide to distract ourselves with what matters right now.

That's exactly what the disciples did. As they walked back to Capernaum, and eventually made it there, they occupied their thoughts with the here and now. Specifically, which one was the greatest among them.

And let me say a word about Capernaum. It's like their home base. It's this quaint sea town, with willowing oaks and terebinths, and a gentle breeze that rolls off the water. And it's kind of sleepy, too. And while it's not a perfect comparison, imagine there was no Millbrook Road in front of us. Imagine the world stopped at the tree line of this property, well before the grass dips into the asphalt. Imagine such a peaceful little forcefield. That's Capernaum for the disciples.

And think about our building – In here, we share meals, and thoughts, and we ask questions. And we feel comfortable enough to put ourselves out there, and to be vulnerable, or even vain around one another. And we aren't afraid to say things, even questionable things, around one another.

Peter's house, which was next the synagogue, didn't look like our sanctuary or fellowship hall. But I imagine it offered the same kind of sanctuary. It was gently nestled, just beyond reach of a restless and stirring world. And here, in this place, around one another, the disciples could be silly, or sad, or simple, or thick-headed, or mad, or, happy, or any of the thousands of emotions a person feels each day.

And so, yeah, they had a conversation about who was the greatest. Lord knows, there were some Marthas among them, and they wanted a little credit for being logistical experts, and for helping to make the machine go. And there were some Marys among them, too, and they wanted to remind the others just how important their keen listening skills were, and how necessary their ministry of presence was for the group's greater good. And I feel certain one of them did 80% of the bill-paying, and another 80% of the yard work, and another 80% of the cooking, and one or two of them probably didn't do a single chore. And I'm sure a few had pleasant personalities, and there were a few that needed to feel the love of Jesus a whole lot more than the others. And since there's gonna be a leadership change (Jesus just said so himself!), why not begin the conversation about the transition to what's next?

The disciples are living in a pre-Easter world. And when we live in a pre-Easter world, we can only use pre-Easter methods to cope with the lives we lead. The disciples live in a world that pre-conditions them to believe in a conditional God, a God who not only rules like Caesar, but loves like Caesar, too. Despite Jesus' love for them, and despite their love for him and one another, they still believe that they have to earn Jesus' affection a little more than their peers. *How will I know that Jesus loves me? I'll know it because I'll sit at his right hand, and I'll be sitting two feet closer than my neighbor.*

So Jesus looks around the room. And he sees a little child. Now, I know we live in a different world, and children have more rights than they used to. And when I say a little child in this place, you imagine one who is loved, and who is cared for, and one who brings value to the world. And I'm biased, extremely biased, about the children who are with us today, and the ones we bless each Sunday. They reveal the kinship of God to me every time we gather.

But remember, in those days, and unfortunately in too many places still today, children were and are considered a burden. They cannot work. They have no rights. They have no ability to advocate for themselves. And they are utterly dependent upon their caretakers. When we imagine the child in today's story, we ought not imagine the children of Millbrook. Try to imagine an orphan in Aleppo. Or maybe a toddler separated from her parents at our southern borders. Or maybe a teenager trying to make it another day in the Seven Dials neighborhood of nineteenth-century London. Or maybe a little boy at a shelter here in Raleigh.

When we think about these children, we are describing people with the least standing in Caesar's world. No money. No strength. No voice. No future. No status.

And Jesus looks at his friends, and I think he looks at you and me, too. And he says:

You know what it means to be great? It means to be last. And it means to serve others. And it means to look into the eyes of a child and see the face of God. Because when we do that, when we value society's most vulnerable, we've got the ability to value every human life. And when we love and value others, we also love and value God. And that empathy, that compassion, brings value to our lives, to every life.

I believe the disciples are preparing for a world without Jesus, or even the next world with him, with an outdated set of tools. Jesus tells them, and Jesus tells you and me:

God's love for us is not bound up in what's quantifiable, or justifiable. God's love for us is bound up in our very existence: children of God. And if we can imagine a world where that status is paramount, we're not gonna be victimized by the miscalculations of Caesar's domination system.

And I guess the thing for us to consider today is this: How often do we let our desire to be first in Caesar's world – even when it's with noble intentions – how often do we let that desire prevent us from being last in God's world?

Are we pursuing stuff? Or are we pursuing life? Are we pursuing work and accomplishments? Or are we pursuing rest and peace? Are we pursuing wealth and prosperity? Or are we pursuing community, equity, and equality? Are we people who like our neighbors? Or are we people who love our neighbors?

A few moments ago, I made the statement, "Don't imagine one of Millbrook's children," to illustrate the child that Jesus hugged, and held up as an example. If I'm honest with myself, I know what Jesus is pushing us to, is to remove a world, where we could imagine that any child would not be treated like "Ours." And to imagine a world, where every child is "Ours." If such a statement is to be true, then we must be a people who pursue life, and sabbath, and community, and love. Love over like, every time.

And if every child is ours, then every adult is ours, too. So I think that means, when we hear "#MeToo," we must respond: "You are my daughter, too, and this will not stand." I think it means that when our neighbors of color proclaim, "My life matters, too," we must respond, "YES, it DOES!" And I think when our neighbors who don't have,

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proclaim, “I want bread, too, and I want a roof, too, and I want an education for my child, too, and I want some of that dignity that you’ve got, too,” we need to give it to them.

I guess what I’m trying to say, Millbrook Baptist Church, is that if we keep clinging to the things that we think make us great in Caesar’s world, we aren’t ever gonna understand what makes us whole in God’s world. Or better, yet, we aren’t ever gonna understand that we are ALL, EACH OF US, whole in God.

Well Millbrook. We’ve got our own little Capernaum. And we all know the Easter Story. And we all know how to love. And we’ve all been loved. So how about we stop trying to be great. And how about we start taking pride in being last. I have a feeling “Our” children, and all “Our” neighbors, and “Our” whole selves will be better for it!

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.