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“Last of All”

Mark 9:30-37

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Mark 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. [Jesus] did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for 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.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 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:

My husband Chris is either every tour guide’s dream or every tour guide’s worst nightmare. I realized this pretty early on in our relationship. We dated for about 4 or 5 months before I



moved from Richmond to Indianapolis, and he was determined to make me fall in love with Virginia – so that I might move back one day. We spent an abnormally large amount of time taking historical tours and visiting museums. And, it never fails that at the end of every tour, the guide asks, “Are there any questions?” Chris is always ready.

I was never brave enough to ask enough questions in my school days. I was afraid to look like I didn’t understand. Everyone else always seemed to know exactly what was going on, and I wasn’t about to be the one to pipe up and reveal my ignorance. In second grade, I got my first C – not because I couldn’t comprehend what the teacher was teaching, but simply because I couldn’t see what was written on the chalkboard. I needed glasses. But I assumed that everyone else in the class could see what I was seeing – and it wasn’t until a school eye exam that my parents had any idea that I couldn’t read the writing on the wall. In my eighth grade honors algebra class, I was always a step behind. I had changed classes midway through the first 9-weeks, and never asked the teacher to help me catch up. I was afraid to look like a dummy. The pattern continued. Each year in algebra, geometry or pre-calc, I listened and took notes, I memorized equations, but I never understood the theorems behind them. Once a test was over, I quickly forgot it all. I limped my way along, until I slogged my way through college math courses, and then never darkened the threshold of a math class again.

Chris says he always tries to have a question for the tour guide because whenever he is teaching a training course at work, he longs for someone to ask him something – to show he’s been paying attention, to show an interest in learning more.

In Mark, the disciples are afraid to ask questions. Jesus has just predicted his impending crucifixion, and they have no idea what he is talking about. Their fear precludes them from even asking.

I know far too many Christians who are afraid to ask questions. Sometimes, we’re afraid to ask because we believe we should already know the answers, or because we are afraid to look like we are dumb. Sometimes, we’re afraid to ask because we aren’t sure the question is “okay,” or perhaps we think that it’s unfaithful to ask questions.

As a culture, we tend to equate intelligence with knowing things. But true intelligence isn’t measured by how much you know – it is measured by how eager you are to learn more. It is at the edges of what we know that we discover the greatest chance to grow and learn. Questions are not the mark of a lack of intelligence, but of a curious and lively mind.

Another reason why we may be afraid to ask questions is that we think it is unfaithful. Somewhere, somehow, some of us were taught that questions reveal a sense of doubt and uncertainty, and doubt must surely be the opposite of faith.

I have sat by more than a few bedsides as people are nearing the end of this earthly life, and I have had some of those individuals wrestle with questions and doubt. But faith and doubt do not exist separate from each other. Without doubt, there is certainty and knowledge. Given that faith is the belief in things not seen, doubt seems to be an essential ingredient.

Mark says, “...they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” They did not ask any questions because they were afraid. Fear, not doubt, has a way of leading us in the wrong direction. The decisions I regret most in life are decisions I made out of fear. Fear



has this way of misleading us, of leading us to misperceive threats and opportunities. It can narrow our vision so it's nearly impossible to see possibilities.

In a commentary on this passage, Michael Kiel points out that this isn't the only time Mark contrasts faith and fear. After he stills the storm, Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Mark 4:40). And as he brings Jairus' daughter back to life, he tells her distraught father, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36). Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but this kind of paralyzing, distorting, despairing fear is.

The disciples are afraid, so instead of asking questions, they begin to talk among themselves and argue over who is the greatest. It's an argument many of us grow weary of today. They are frightened and insecure, so they begin to compare and to boast.

Jesus must have overheard their bickering from one town to the other, and so he asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" The disciples are silent, embarrassed.

Perhaps they were boasting about which one of them was the closest to Jesus, or maybe which one had seen the greatest miracle, or even performed the greatest miracle. We don't really know. What we do know, however, is that Jesus is not impressed. So he tells them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This is most definitely not what culture had taught them. (We can relate – it's not what our culture teaches us either.) Greatness, we assume, implies power, knowledge, accomplishment, wealth, fame (we've heard it said that when you're famous, you can do whatever you want. "When you're a star, they let you do it.... You can do anything.").

But Jesus doesn't spend his time with the powerful of his day. He doesn't praise the rich for making it, or the prominent for their place in society. He surrounds himself with common people. He welcomes little children. In Mark 9, he scoops up a little child and tells the disciples that whoever welcomes this little child is actually welcoming Jesus – and the one who sent Jesus.

In the first-century world, children were of little account. They were the property of their fathers. In fact, if a father didn't claim a child, that child was often left out to the elements. As a part of a household, they were seen as less-than-adults. Certainly, there were parents who loved their children, but those children had no legal rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly powerless, utterly vulnerable. And it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies.

Adam Arnett lived in the L'Arche Daybreak community north of Toronto. It is an intentional community for adults with intellectual disabilities. At L'Arche, people with disabilities, and those who assist them, live together in homes and apartments, sharing life with one another and building community. Adam, who could not speak or even move without assistance, was the first person Henri Nouwen was asked to take care of when he joined the community. Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, an incredibly smart man who communicated in 5 different languages, and authored 39 books on the spiritual life. In 1985, Nouwen left his Harvard professorship to become a resident in L'Arche. A friendship developed between Arnett and Nouwen. And over time, Nouwen writes, Arnett became his teacher and guide.

In his posthumously published book *Adam: God's Beloved*, Nouwen shares how he took care of his friend physically, and how his own life was gradually transformed so that his time with



Arnett was precious time with a friend, not simply as care giver and receiver. He writes, “While I was preoccupied with the way I was talked about or written about, Adam was quiet, telling me that God’s love is more important than the praise of people.” “I recognized that Adam’s way, the way of radical vulnerability, was also the way of Jesus.”¹ To many, Nouwen’s choice to leave the world of academia seemed crazy, but for him, it opened up a new understanding of the gospel.

To the disciples, Jesus’ definition of greatness seems crazy. It is so countercultural. He calls them to imagine that true greatness lies in the taking care of those who are most vulnerable, those with the least influence and power, those the culture is most likely to ignore.

Jesus describes what the kingdom of God is like. Those who are most honored in God’s kingdom are the servants and those who are the least. The ancient world was infused with a strong sense of honor and shame. There was no middle class. Most of the wealth was accumulated at the very top of the social structure, and the bulk of ordinary people found themselves very poor. The rich wanted to associate with only the rich, and they would intentionally insult and demean those who were slightly less rich, and hoped to accumulate favor with those who were above them.

Against this backdrop, Jesus’ words are radical.

It is hard for us to choose humility and service. It is hard for us to admit when we are wrong, to sacrifice power and prestige for truth and justice.

The disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was trying to tell them, so they fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. We often do the same. In moments of fear, it is easier to look out for ourselves rather than others. Afraid for our comfort or future, we put our trust more in our wealth than on God. When we are fearful, it is easier to build walls and shut others out, rather than welcome others in.

It’s a line we hear preached over and over again – that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. But when we consider what that means for those of us living lives of comfort, it can get uncomfortable. I know it feels that way for me.

The grace in this story is that the road the disciples are walking when they fall into their petty arguments – the road they are walking is the road to Jerusalem. Even while they misunderstand, don’t believe, or just ignore what Jesus is saying, Jesus is walking the road to Jerusalem for them. And we know what the disciples are afraid to ask: at the end of this road, Jesus will sacrifice everything for them, and for us.

Jesus comes into our world proclaiming that the reign of God has come near, calling for repentance, healing diseases and disabilities, and forgiving sin. Throughout his earthly ministry, he associates with the least in society – Gentiles (Mark 7:24-30), lepers (Mark 1:40-45), tax collectors and other notorious sinners (Mark 1:13-17), and raging demoniacs (Mark 5:1-20). And, he even welcomes and makes time for little children (Mark 10:13-16).

And for all of this, we know he will be condemned as an outlaw and blasphemer by the religious authorities. Jesus will die because he came declaring the forgiveness of sins. Jesus will die because he associates with the impure and the worst of sinners. Jesus will die because the religious establishment cannot tolerate the radical grace that Jesus proclaims. Such radical grace that obliterates the world’s notions of greatness.



And so, it turns out that the definition of greatness is indeed a theological question; a question that we are asked to consider. While we were yet sinners, our great God humbled God's self and took on the form of a servant, took on the form of a human. The incarnation, the moment God became flesh, God upended every assumption of greatness that the world ever knew. In Jesus Christ, we discover that "greatness is not about separation but solidarity, not about better than but relationship. Not about self-adulation, but empowerment and encouragement of the other."ⁱⁱ

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Greatness on Jesus' terms could not be more countercultural.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved*, Orbis Books, 1997 (p. 56).

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, *Dear Working Preacher: The Greatest*, Sept 17, 2018.

