

Mark 9:30-37

So these guys are just not getting it... Surprise... who is Jesus... why is He here and what is His purpose? Jesus tries to show them but they have yet to make the connection between Him and God.

And the idea of what the cross was in Jesus' day was the furthest thing from anyone's minds... I mean why would you talk about death in the wave of excitement and energy surrounding Jesus's ministry right now... they were the talk of the town... they were viral.

See we think in human terms... but thinking beyond our own conditions and our own physical senses is often difficult and challenging for us... imagine these uneducated students of Jesus trying to grasp all this stuff!

Hebrew thinking and Jewish teachings are always grounded in the physical elements

that they live in. Land is important... food is important... Tribe and family is important... then and also now. But Jesus was pointing to something beyond our current lifetimes and histories... and Jesus pointed to His own death to accomplish the task of joining heaven and earth... both physically and spiritually.

Remember The Messiah translated as "the anointed one"... meaning a king! That term fit a very specific idea... the return of a great king who would lead them from their oppressors back into the golden age of Judaism... in other words the messiah would make Israel great again... The Hebrew's wanted a return to the good old days when they were on the top of the heap... sound familiar at all!?

See when they were on top... everybody else was on the bottom... in the kingdom of man you are either on the top or below... and we all want to be on top... some things never change... and once you're on top... well then you oppress those below you and attempt to keep that status quo... while everyone else is trying to scratch and claw their way back on top in a never ending cycle... look at a sports team... or just look at Israel and the middle east today... same stuff! We can't evolve from this way of being with one another... the idea is that eventually both become one and there really is no top or bottom.

And for Israel, other than the prophet Isaiah... Jewish thought and the Hebrew Bible did not break this cycle of power and kingship! Heck we still look at things this way today! We can't comprehend transcendence and transformation in the form of suffering, death, and resurrection...who wants that?

We have talked before about the Old Testament focusing on God's laws to fulfill God's purpose on earth and to ensure our relationship with God in all righteousness and in the New Testament, we see that Jesus transcends these written laws to focus Israel back to the Spirit of the law that created them in the first place.

And that Spirit is always love (agape)... ultimately sacrificial love in the form of one being giving their life for another... we see Jesus throughout the new testament continually speaking about and giving examples to His disciples in order for them to understand this higher evolved concept.

We know that in order for any of us to live that something else must die... our food usually... and we also know that our life here is always going to be temporary... man has long since known and has strived for understanding that which is beyond the veil of our meager lifetimes.

Jesus once again tries to demonstrate this concept in the form of a child...Jesus trying to get His disciples to understand welcoming another human being... regardless of social status... or wealth... or power.

If these disciples could see God in this worth less child, then maybe they would make the leap in connecting at a deeper level with the animating spirit of God in their connection with ALL others...regardless of our human constructs getting in the way.

This lesson is at the heart of Marks community as well... they also struggled to understand who Jesus was and what that might mean for their own lives instead of the glory and power that we still crave today...They thought that if they were on the right side of God then shouldn't they be rewarded with status and power in their wn lives...otherwise what's the point!?

Why would you be rewarded with suffering and death...didn't make any sense!

Do you and I seek to live a life contrary to the Kingdom of man in order that we might understand and share in the resurrection of Jesus which transcends our brief lifetimes here?

Again Jesus shows us this upside down, right side up view of Creation... and the paradox that exists for us between the Kingdom of man and the Kingdom of God.

The word servant used here is once again diakoneous... our word for Deacon... a servant to all... regardless of status or power... and a Deacon is always to be the bridge for us between the church and the world... the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of man.

A bridge between those who have... and those who have not... the deacon is here to remind us of the children in our midst... the worth less ones who have no say or voice in our world.

The deacons are those that point to the door... at the dismissal the door warden commands us to bring God's love out that door and into the world. Remember back then a child did not contribute to the economic value of a household or community... a child could not do anything to enhance a person's power or influence... one would obtain no benefits regarding honor or respect because of a child.

Children AND servants were equally of low social status and it's here once again... against this background... that Jesus' teachings are crystal clear... honor and welcome the worthless... for in welcoming them... in this case a child... you are welcoming Jesus Himself and therefore welcoming the God who sent Him...

This is far from the cuddly sweet little children that Jesus welcomes in our Sunday schools... instead it is a paradoxical depiction of the difference between what we and society value and what God values.

This is not Jesus meek and mild... this is Jesus in the form of God granting power to those without any power... bringing hope and love to those who have little to no worth in our society... these are not the influencers that God values.

With Jesus' radical ideals and teachings... it is no wonder that his young apprentices have little to no understanding about who this Jesus really is...or what He is even saying.

If you want to follow Jesus, you must accept the least of these in your midst... so which Messiah will you follow? Our Lord and King in glory and in power... or Jesus the humble and radical teacher who laid down His life for ALL...especially for the powerless and the vulnerable.

Cause that's who Jesus is... and we still keep getting this wrong today... especially when we take these radical ideas and hide them around a sense of power and nationalism!

In doing that, we will always be on the wrong side of God... for whoever welcomes the least of these... welcomes Jesus into their hearts...and whoever welcomes Jesus then welcomes the one who sent Him...The Divine Source of All Our Being...God...who transcends our physical time and space...God who transcends these fragile bodies and temporary life spans!

Radical servant leadership is not just for us here in the church but is also then to be enacted out the door as a witness of the church to the world. None of this is Easy to understand...or grasp.

This part of Mark's gospel occurs within his second major section...which contains a threefold pattern that appears well - three times more. Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection...then the disciples don't get it... and then Jesus then gives them more explanations.

Mark uses the title "Son of Man" taken from the OT Daniel (7:13) to reveal that there can be no doubt that Jesus is no ordinary rabbi. Yet the disciples remain confused...as they did throughout their lives...just like us!

And this entire section in Mark's gospel is framed at the beginning and end by accounts of blind people being given sight...Big Clue Here! As the blind are given sight, so too the disciples, who are blind to Jesus' mission and identity, are also gradually given sight.

Knowing and not knowing...understanding and not understanding these themes are woven throughout Mark chapters 8 and 9...So “Who do you say that I am?” then we will get the transfiguration and then Jesus once again tries to explain what lies ahead for Him...He will suffer, He will die and He will rise!

Another important aspect of today’s gospel is the very act of not knowing!!!

The disciples were embarrassed at being caught in a power struggle...status, power and position is what they associated with the Messiah...kinda like we do today...so Jesus uses a child as the model for discipleship.

This is not a new role for disciples of any age and in any day...we also struggle with the same things today in our Christian National Society...in our struggle for power, status, and self-righteousness we can often lose the plot.

For them... and for us... the prospect of the Messiah being taken and killed...losing...just does not compute. When God comes into glory, it is to conquer our enemies, not to “be handed over to power and corruption and killed. They couldn’t comprehend this notion and so were afraid to ask any questions.

Today we also don’t like to appear uninformed, confused, or clueless. Especially with access to so much information...after all we can just google it! Yet we withhold our toughest questions...often right here in our own churches so as not appear dumb.

We pretend we don’t have hard questions...but we better! The deepest mysteries of life still eludes us all. Why do good people suffer? Why are humans so brutal to one another? Why does evil win? If God’s own Son is betrayed and killed, then who can be safe? Why did an all-knowing God create a mixed-up world like this?

We can speculate and guess... but we never truly know...but see its’ the conversation that’s key! When the disciples, and us, avoid asking the hard questions...we then tend to focus on posturing about who’s ideas are right or wrong...us vs them...without the conversation and the hard questions being placed in front of us we all lose...we guess the answers without having the conversation and we love to assess blame don’t we?

We know this in our churches and in our nation...for example do you really think if solving the country's economy had a right or wrong answer that it wouldn't have already been solved by now...Do you really think 4 years of a republican or a democrat can fix and right all the complexities in a nation when everything around the globe affects the economy...there are hundreds, if not more, variables at play.

Economists who dedicate their whole life to this can't agree... so instead why not have the hard conversations with one another instead of just finger pointing. In fact look at any modern country...every country in the world is going through the same exact challenges. If there was an easy fix... someone very smart would have had the answer by now.

The good news is that Jesus welcomes us all... even when we don't understand or just plain don't know...and in some cases we may never know as some things are too big or complex for us. Today's gospel ends with Jesus embracing a small child, the ultimate symbol of not knowing...of not understanding...a child is immature and undeveloped...but it has the potential to evolve and grow...evolve and grow.

We don't need to fear our questions...our misunderstandings... our confusion... or our curiosity in the presence of God.

As disciples may we always know... that we don't know...and may we always welcome everyone into the ongoing conversation of what it means to be human and what it means to be a child of God.

Your faithful servant,
carmen