

Convention Eucharist 2008 Sermon
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Mark 9:30-41

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem; he had just come from the mountain of the Transfiguration with Peter, James and John; where his glory had been revealed and the disciples were confused about what to do. Jesus uses the walk through Galilee as an opportunity for instruction. He tells them about what will happen when they get to Jerusalem.

I find the language used interesting - The Son of man is to be betrayed (delivered) -- Jesus doesn't say, "Someone will betray me" and he doesn't say, "I will fall into human hands." Rather the author puts that sentence in the passive voice: what is to happen is something that will happen *to* him; he is the receiver of the action (If you remember your eighth grade English grammar). This behavior is something beyond his control, and receiving behavior must rely on grace.

The disciples don't get it. Do we get it? Do we understand? Like the disciple, we grasp bits and pieces, but it's hard to see the whole picture. Frequently we accept the parts we understand, or like, or that agree with us, but neglect to grasp the rest. We lack either the vision, or sometimes frankly even the energy to live into the vision.

So what do the disciples do? They try to distract Jesus' lesson plan. (I've taught 1st grade and graduate school and students, no matter their ability or level of achievement, will try to distract a lesson plan.) Jesus is talking about a radical plan for new life, for salvation. He's trying to tell them that when society acts on you in ways you can't control, when your whole life is lived in the passive voice, when you receive a beating in one form or another, and the world grinds you down, and crushes you until the life pours out of you, and you hang your head and give up

your spirit, that God will continue to act on your behalf – to raise you up, and give you a new life. Here is a major shift in religious thought, a whole new way of understanding God, a transformative approach to living. And the disciples won't go there; distraction is easier than accommodating the change. They begin to argue among themselves about who is the greatest. The church, like families, and classrooms, and society in general, is expert at distracting from the agenda – and the three things that we most like to use as detractors from the agenda of resurrection life is sex, money and power.

Here's a familiar scenario: Your rector comes to the vestry meeting all fired up for a community project. The local ecumenical association has come up with a plan for outreach into the community that will alleviate suffering, draw local congregations together, be a visible presence in the community, and your church, your little congregation, has the key resources of people and money to get the project off the ground and flying, and your priest is jazzed about this and begins to outline how members of the outreach committee have the excitement, energy, and expertise to give this program life! And a little voice somewhere down the table, probably sitting behind the Junior Warden says, "But we need to save our funds in case the boiler goes out this winter."

And Jesus turns and asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent.

Jesus sits down. Now, when Jesus sits down in the gospels that's the signal to get out your notepads and pay attention – it's the rabbi position for teaching; when Jesus sits down he means business.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then Jesus gets out the first century version of an audio-visual aide. He draws a little child into their midst so that all could see her (the

disciples would have been shocked at such a gesture) and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." In drawing the disciples' attention to the child in their midst Jesus gets the lesson plan back on track. Although children of the 1st century Mediterranean world were loved in their homes they were regarded as non persons. They were not economically productive; they had no power, no control, and no rights in society. A father could even sell a child to pay off the family debt.

Jesus makes the small child a symbol of himself. The one who is to be betrayed, the passive voiced receiver of the evils of the world, is like that child who is socially invisible, who also receives whatever the world deals to it. And Jesus tells us that like the child, he is last, least and servant of all. He wants his disciples, including us, to recognize that God gives of God's self in the least godly way, not in majesty and power, but with both vulnerability and trust – the only way the child in their midst is able to live her life.

John, then, interrupts the lesson, expecting a little praise from the teacher for excluding a non-member of the in and inner group from what he believes to be a member's only activity – casting out demons in Jesus name. The disciples fall into a trap that snares many religious groups wanting to restrict salvation to their group alone, but it also raises a question about parochial defensiveness and our need to defend and protect our own territory. Jesus says, "Do not stop him." Jesus' tolerance is a reminder that God fulfills God's own mission in many ways, and that the truth is bigger than our own grasp of it.

This morning's gospel closes with Jesus telling the disciples, "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." This is the only instance in the Gospel of Mark where the word "reward" is used, and isn't it interesting that the reward isn't necessarily given to those

who belong, but to those who perform the least kindness to those who do. In other words the outsider is eligible for the reward.

I believe we can derive some wisdom for our common life as a diocese, as the church, from this morning's gospel, which will help us live together in healthy ways. First, as one of my seminary professors used to say, "Keep the main thing the main thing." The agenda is already set by Jesus; it is powerful, transformative and life-giving, if we pay attention and not allow ourselves to be distracted.

Remember it's not about us. Don't focus on saving the church, because that will sap life and energy from you. Focus instead on how to reach the world around you. Think about those who live outside the walls of the church. How do you welcome them in service, hospitality and grace?

Give your ministry away. It was never yours in the first place. Share it with others the way the ministry of the Eucharist is designed to be shared among the community. Invite people to join with you, make disciples.

Let Jesus sit down in your midst and be your teacher. In J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Peter explains to Wendy that the lost boys are lost because they have no one to tell them stories. My friends, the story is before us and Jesus comes among us in scripture, in liturgy, and in a heritage that wanders back two thousand years. But unless we tell the stories and rehearse them among ourselves we will lose the next generation who will go longing and looking for a story that gives meaning to their lives.

The disciples were unable to accommodate change, they learned the lesson in the end, but for now they don't get it; we can learn from them and allow ourselves to become what we proclaim. Different is not dangerous, and we can be transformed by those things which we receive. The church in the next generation is going to go through significant change, and we need to be prepared to

move through it without fear and with grace. Esther deWaal in a devotional book entitled *To Pause at the Threshold* writes, "Living with uncertainty is not the same as living with insecurity." Our future is uncertain, but it is secure in the knowledge and love of God who is always there for us. And we can move into the future knowing that our Christian identity is always in the process of being born and made new. Amen.