

Holy Hospitality

Shepherd's Grace Church

September 23, 2012

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He 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." (also read James 3: 13-4: 8)

For the past several weeks we have been listening to James epistle. I have read this letter several times before, but never has it captivated me as it has this time. Perhaps because I see such a startling parallel between it and the place we are studying in Mark's gospel. Perhaps because I am reminded that James is Jesus half-brother and in the month of September I am reminded of my own brother who was both born and died in this month. At any rate, James words have a strong and clear impact on the Gospel lesson for today.

"Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you," James says in chapter 4, but the interesting part of that statement is that James did not choose to draw near to God...at least not right away! James lived his whole life with Jesus. He grew up watching and in later life witnessing the examples of Jesus participation with us as humans, but he did not really believe in who Jesus was until after the work Christ did on the cross. He had to see the whole of Jesus purpose before he came to believe. He was not able to draw near to God right away.

That seems to be the case for many of us. We can see the evidence of God's presence in our lives, but we are unable to grasp the fullness of God's work in our lives! When we are sick, or suffering injury, disability, or loss, we cannot comprehend God's grace. Frequently, in fact, what we comprehend is a sense of questioning; a sense of wondering at why these things are happening to us. We are not able to see the big picture of what God has planned for us so we are not able to trust. I do not know if this is

where James was in his faith life, but it is where many of us are. It is also where the disciples appear to be this morning as Mark's gospel intersects with James' letter. They cannot see the big picture!

In Chapter 9 of Mark's gospel, Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James, and John. They saw the greatness of God at work in Jesus, the Messiah!...then they were told to say nothing until he had been raised from the dead. What does this mean they wondered. They did not understand the big picture. Immediately after they came down the mountain, other disciples were unable to cast out a demon. Jesus asked, "How much longer must I suffer your lack of faith." The disciples could not cast out the demon because they could not comprehend the fullness of the power Jesus had given them. Just as they failed to understand their power in God in the feeding of the 5000, so now they could not see the fullness in this moment.

The big picture is not always clear, but rather, it is a matter of faith. It is a matter of trust. September 23 was my brother Steve's birthday. As I have reflected on the message for this week, thoughts about my brother have traveled through my mind as well. One thought was of his wedding day. One of the traditions of a wedding in our family, and in many, is that the groomsmen decorate the groom's car. True to tradition, we got the keys to Steve's car and we decorated it royally.

One of my brother's gifts was his ability to see the big picture just a little more clearly than many of the rest of us. Steve knew that we would use shaving cream, chalk, whipped cream, tin cans, post toasties and paper to decorate the car to the point that it would be most uncomfortable to ride in. When he and his new bride came out of the church and walked down the walk I was one of the last ones in line next to his car. He looked at the car, looked back at me, gave me a big smile and a thumbs up sign as if to say, "Nice job on the car!" ...Then he walked right on by his car and got into his father-in-law's car and headed off for his honeymoon!

Steve trusted that we would do what was expected so he did what was unexpected because he was able to see the big picture and achieve a more desirable result! Jesus has now taken his disciples back home. They are in Galilee, and they are there for one purpose, so he can teach them about what it means to be Messiah! He wants no one to know they are there. He wants no other distractions. He wants them to "get it." He wants them to trust Him with the expected so they can begin to anticipate the unexpected!

Jesus begins to teach, "the Son of Man must be handed over into human hands and be killed and after he is killed he will be raised again in 3 days." The disciples would have heard this phrase "handed over" and they should have known as we should that it means betrayed. Jesus would be betrayed by his own. They could not comprehend this statement. Why would someone betray Him? As we look from the other side of the cross, it is easy for us to see. We know we are all sinners, saved by grace. We know that the only way God could accomplish the fullness of His plan would be to have the One without sin to take on the sin of the world. Worldly men would have to accomplish this task. Just as my brother knew

that the only way for his plan to work was for us to do what was expected of us, God also knew that the only way for his plan to work was for all of us to do what was expected in this world.

Let me be clear in this! We all “handed over” the Son of Man. Because of our sin and our need to be restored into right relationship with God, we betrayed Him! We gave him up so we might be redeemed. We did not understand at the time, but we did what was expected. Along that line, it is interesting to note where this teaching occurs in Mark’s gospel. Chapter 9 is almost exactly the middle of Mark’s message. The disciples and all of us who are reading and following along with them are right in the middle.

The middle is the most difficult place from which to gain perspective. In the middle of illness we have a difficult time seeing wellness. In the middle of chemo therapy, we have difficulty imagining cure! In the middle of broken relationships, we have difficulty seeing reconciliation! In the middle of betrayal, we have difficulty understanding forgiveness! The real problem, however is that we are always in the middle. Life is in the middle and the comprehension of God’s plan requires that we find a way through the middle to see the big picture, “God’s desire to offer salvation and redemption to all of us!”

It is little wonder then that Jesus disciples, “did not understand what he was teaching.” They were stuck in the middle and they could not see the fullness of who he was. The middle they were stuck in was Galilee. Galilee was a place of oppression by the Romans! The people were taxed into poverty. Galilee was a place of religious elitism! The Pharisees and scribes held full power in the interpretation of God’s place in their lives. Without control over their physical lives and without control over spiritual lives, the people were without hope!

The disciples, in their journey with Jesus, started to find some hope in Him. They believed that he would be the one to restore Israel to the former days of King David. They believed that in Jesus they would find economic security and political and religious freedom. They believed he was the one who would save them in this world. It was for this reason that they did not understand him when he was teaching them that he must be handed over. Their need for Messiah was focused on the needs of this world. They were as Jesus told Peter in chapter 8, fixed on their human needs and not on heavenly needs!

Jesus needed to re-teach them about Messiah. He understood that. What slowed the process was the disciples unwillingness to ask questions. Their fear, not of Jesus, but of his changing of their reality kept them from asking him the questions most necessary to make their learning possible. As humans we understand this fear. None of us wants to admit we do not know. Intelligent people know...right? Our ego and our desire to be right in our world view get in the way of understanding God’s big picture. How slow are we to recognize in the middle that God has a bigger plan?

In church yesterday, I invited the entire congregation to write a question they would have for Jesus if they could be in this teaching moment. I will invite you to do the same right now. You don't have to write it down, but ask it in your mind! What would you ask Jesus if he were sitting right there beside you? I will not share the questions asked in church. I do not want to influence your questioning process. My prayer is that you will recognize as one of Jesus' disciples that God wants us to ask the questions. God wants, not our ego and our confidence that we have the right answers, but God wants our willingness to understand that there is more to His kingdom than our correctness!

God wants our curiosity! He wants us to wonder, not just at how the heavens and earth were made, but at all God wants to do with this marvelous creation. He welcomes our questions and wants us to ask more. For this reason, Jesus brought the disciples to Capernaum. When he went into the house he asked them what they had been arguing about on the road. He was met with silence. When we fail to ask questions, to get clarification, we often make decisions based on what we think we know! This is exactly what Satan wants us to do.

Satan wants our arrogance, our ego to drive our lives. He wants us to ignore God's teaching and behave as the rest of the world behaves. He wants us to become power hungry, wealth motivated greedy people. He will tempt us with opportunities for power and greed because he knows that these are opposite of God's will for the world. Yesterday, I played a video of Paul Harvey's commentary on "*If I Were the Devil.*" *Here is the link to that broadcast.*

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/H3Az0okaHig?rel=0>

Paul Harvey first aired this homily in 1965 and it has been revised over the years to include some of our most contemporary temptations. The point is that unless we are willing to ask questions of God, we will begin to choose as humans. That is what the disciples were arguing about. Their focus was not on God's plan for redemption which Jesus wanted to teach, but rather on which of them would be the greatest. Their definition of greatness was defined not by God but by the world. Jesus turns this definition upside down. "Whoever would be first must be last of all and servant of all!" The greatest of us must not be the one with the most possessions and wealth and power, but the one willing to give beyond all that he possesses! The Son of Man had to be killed by humans so he could serve even those who killed them, so he could take on their sin in order that they might be redeemed! He who is the greatest among us had to reduce himself to least and most despised by God in order that we might be worthy to stand in God's presence.

The little child that Jesus places in our midst represents, not us, but the best and worst of us. The little child cries, and complains. The little child makes messes and mistakes. The little child also represents our future. He or she carries on life and the possibility for human growth. The little child offers the potential for future generations to ask the questions we have not asked; to accept God's teaching and offer that potential for learning to others.

When we welcome this child in Jesus name, we welcome the potential for humanity to be changed. That is our role as disciples; we are to extend *Holy Hospitality*. This kind of hospitality encourages differences of opinion. It encourages those who have less to strive for more. It encourages those who do not know to hear the Good News! It encourages humanity to recognize that we are all different, but our differences are our greatest strengths! In our differences we can appreciate the freshness of new ideas and new wisdom. *Holy Hospitality* recognizes and rejoices in the stranger because the stranger is not only the one who came, but is the representative of the one who sent Him.

God sent His Son. The called him Jesus. He came to heal, love and Forgive! He lived and died to by my pardon; an empty grave is there to prove my savior lives! As disciples, we are called not to be the little children, but to extend the hospitality. May God bless you this week with His Grace as you welcome the stranger in our midst!

Amen!