Sermon 09-23-18

Coming in First Place Last

Mark 9:30-37

**Sermon Starter**

There are a lot of lessons for life we can find in the four gospels of the New Testament. I am sure if you have read and studied the gospels that you would agree with me on that point. Now, I don’t want to boast, but I think I’m a lot smarter than Jesus’ disciples. I imagine you are, too. We’re all slow to catch on at times, but these guys *never* seem to get it! Especially in Mark’s account — which is our gospel this year — the disciples are completely dense right up to the end.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Jesus had *twice* fed large groups of people with just a little bit of food, **GRAPHIC: and just a little while later the disciples are worried because they have only one loaf of bread.** “Do you have eyes, and fail to see?” Jesus asks, sounding frustrated. “Do you have ears, and fail to hear? … Do you not yet understand?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

On another occasion, Jesus tells a parable to a group of people to make a point. **GRAPHIC: His disciples are supposed to be the ones who understand the parables, but Jesus has to explain it to them patiently. “Then do you also fail to understand?” he asks.[[2]](#footnote-2)**They never seem to understand. At one point, it sounds as though Peter has caught on when he says that Jesus is the Messiah, but when Jesus starts talking about the death that awaits him in Jerusalem, Peter objects. He doesn’t really understand what being God’s Messiah means after all.

Maybe we shouldn’t be too surprised. After all, Jesus was doing unique and amazing things, so it wasn’t really obvious who he was. What kind of person *can* quiet a storm with a word or heal a sick person with a touch? And we’ve all found it hard to grasp the point of some of those parables.

**Not understanding**

But what can you say when people just don’t understand plain words? In our text, Jesus tells them for the second time what is going to happen in Jerusalem. **GRAPHIC: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him.” “But,” we’re told, “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”**

That’s bad enough. But then, just after Jesus has told them that he is going to his death, his followers start arguing among themselves about which one is the greatest. Talk about not getting it!

It may be a little hard to picture the 12 disciples behaving this way. One commentary says, “The disciples are struck dumb with embarrassment, for they recognize the discrepancy between Jesus’ denial of self and their own desire for self-aggrandizement as they argue about who is the greatest. Their misunderstanding is not simply intellectual; it is existential [having to do with human existence]. Their following of Jesus is outward only. He challenges them at a key point: the nature of true greatness.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Probably they weren’t saying “Nyah, nyah, I’m greater than you!” like little children. But we’re familiar with more subtle name-calling and joking putdowns that aren’t entirely jokes, not to mention the trash talk that’s common in sports and politics today. **GRAPHIC: There are ways of saying “I’m the greatest” without quite saying that.**

Still — how could they just not understand what Jesus was saying? How could they not realize that “they will kill him” meant that Jesus was going to be *dead*?

Maybe it was because they didn’t *want* to get it. The message wasn’t something they wanted to hear. **GRAPHIC: In a way, Friedrich Nietzsche (KNEE-chee) put it best. It was something they *couldn’t*hear because it was so different from the way they expected things to be and wanted them to be.**

“My son wouldn’t be doing drugs!” the anguished parent tells the school counselor. “He’s a good kid. We’ve brought him up right. There’s no way he’d get into that kind of thing!” The evidence of changes in behavior and poor grades and questionable new friends can’t matter because it would clash with the way the parent wants things to be. We can filter out things we don’t want to hear.

The polar ice and the glaciers in the northern hemisphere have been shrinking for several years and the habitable zones for different plants and animals have been moving slowly northward. Planting seasons for your garden begin earlier now than they did a few years ago.

How many people have you heard say, “No, I don’t believe that stuff about global warming. Remember how cold it got last February? I hear there are some scientists who don’t buy it either. God wouldn’t let us mess up the world’s climate.”

We don’t want there to be global warming because it would upset the familiar patterns of our lives, and because doing something about it would require some sacrifice. It’s easier not to understand, not to hear. **GRAPHIC: It’s like people putting their fingers in their ears and saying “Blah, blah, blah. I can’t hear you!” to drown out some unwelcome words.**

It’s like Jesus’ disciples. We want to think about our own status, not the Messiah leading us to the cross.

**Real greatness**

The disciples don’t want to tell Jesus what they had been arguing about. There’s still some hope for them if they realize that that’s a problem. But Jesus knows what’s going on. They want to be “the greatest” — but what do they think greatness is? Can they even begin to imagine what it means to be great if the Messiah of Israel is to die as an outcast?

At that point, probably not. They aren’t even able to hear that Jesus is going to die. So, Jesus doesn’t try to give them a detailed explanation of the theology of the Cross and its ethical implications. But he does try to get at their one-upmanship.

**GRAPHIC: If you want to be the greatest, he tells them, you have to be willing to be the least [the last]. To be great, you have to be the servant.** That means more than hoping to work your way up from the mailroom to being CEO of the company. Maybe you will, but you’ll never be truly great, Jesus says, if you aren’t willing to serve.

But when a person is in that condition of not wanting to hear, just more words may not help. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel would sometimes perform “action prophecies” to dramatize their messages. **GRAPHIC: Jesus does the same here when he takes a child in his arms and tells the disciples that whoever welcomes such a child is welcoming Jesus and the One who sent him.** Just ruling a nation or becoming rich and famous isn’t what true greatness is about. Being concerned about the welfare of children and serving the poor, the sick and those rejected by society are the kinds of things that show real greatness.

Did the disciples get it then? Maybe for a little while, but it doesn’t seem to have stuck. In the next chapter of Mark, after Jesus has spoken again and in more detail of his coming rejection and death, there’s that incident in which James and John ask to have the places of honor next to Jesus in his glory. The other disciples are angry about this (maybe because they wish they’d thought of it first!), and Jesus again tries to get through to them. **GRAPHIC: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,” he says. This time he connects that clearly with what is going to happen to him. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Well, does anybody finally get it? In Mark’s gospel it isn’t one of Jesus’ disciples who does. It’s the pagan centurion who says, “Truly this man was God’s Son” — when Jesus has died on the cross.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Eventually, of course, Jesus’ disciples did realize that he had been raised from the dead and that the Cross wasn’t the end of the story. They hadn’t gotten that when he’d spoken of resurrection, and even after they saw him alive that first Easter, “some doubted.”[[6]](#footnote-6)The words about his death were too bad to be heard, and the news of his resurrection was too good to be true!

Mark doesn’t present Easter as something that erases the reality of Good Friday. In his version of the Easter story, the fearful women run from the empty tomb and the angelic announcement that Jesus has been raised — and that’s it. End of story.

**An adult message**

Mark is an industrial-strength gospel. It has a “happy ending.” but it isn’t a “feel good” message. It’s an adult message that addresses the real world.

There are real threats to human life and well-being, and some of the most serious threats arise from within us. **GRAPHIC: Jesus became one of us and took on the powers of evil, suffering the worst they could do.** Now he is risen, victorious over those powers, and we are called as his disciples to an ongoing struggle.

Often the situations we face are hard and confusing, and we just don’t get it. In spite of knowing how Jesus’ story turned out, we’re not really much brighter than those original disciples.

We need to do the best we can, but what Mark tells us is that **GRAPHIC: Jesus is going to stick with us in spite of our failings. We don’t have to pretend to be the greatest because the one who really is the greatest is on our side.**

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Mark 8:14-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 7:17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lamar Williamson, Jr, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark 10:43, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mark 15:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Matthew 28:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)