

The Perils of Discipleship
Mark 9:30 - 50
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
February 21, 2010
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You know, this is one of those passages that they warn you about in Seminary. What in the world is going on in the Gospel of Mark? Did you hear what Jesus said? Cut off your own hand? Pluck out your own eye? Of course you heard it. That kind of stuff gets people's attention.

Consider the case of the Idaho man who, in January of 2008 believed that he saw a mark of the devil on his hand, and so he cut it off and then called for an ambulance.¹ Or that of Andre Thomas, a prisoner in Texas who last year plucked out his left eye...five years after having plucked out his right eye.² Both of these men mentioned Jesus' command to his disciples. And you know that they are not alone. Every now and then you hear of something like this, and almost always the news story involves an interview with a pastor or theologian who is put in the unfortunate position of saying something like "Well, of course, you have to be careful with Jesus...you can't take him too seriously, you know..."

Come on, Jesus, for crying out loud! Why are you making things tough on your followers like this? Do you expect us to take you seriously, or not? I mean, it's bad enough with all this talk about your being rejected and killed, but this? Really, Jesus?

I'm telling you, folks, this passage in Mark is a tough one. Let's take a look.

It begins with Mark's comment that Jesus is taking the disciples on a retreat. It is, in fact, that last time that Jesus is in Galilee in the gospel of Mark. He pulls his followers aside and begins to teach them – and what he teaches them is that he's about to suffer and be killed.

Now, remember, please, that these men have just figured out that he is the Messiah. The Savior. The Holy One sent by God. And they know something about Messiahs, Saviors, and Holy Ones – namely, that they are powerful and authoritative. So we're going to have to bear with them if they have a tough time understanding what Jesus is talking about here. And, as it says in verse 32, they clearly didn't understand him.

And so look at what they do: when they do not understand what Jesus is talking about, they start to argue about something that they DO understand. That reminds me of a man I knew in the church I served in New York. He had retired after serving many years in the New York State legislature, and he said to me once, "You know, Dave, it's funny to see how the legislature works. People will vote for a \$700 million highway bill without reading it twice, because most of them don't know anything about either a million dollars or a highway. But we'll spend all day talking about whether or not to spend \$2500 on a playground, because we all

¹ http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2004115587_webhand09m.html

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/09/andre-thomas-texas-death-_n_156765.html

know what \$2500 is and we all know what a playground is.”

The disciples don't even have a category yet for a Messiah who suffers and dies, and so rather than waste any time talking about this lesson from Jesus, they jump right into something that they do know something about: power and position. You see, “everyone knew” that when the Savior finally did come, well, he'd need a little help in establishing his Kingdom on earth. It appears as though these men are spending the afternoon critiquing each other's resumés for a post in the new administration.

So Jesus sits down – which was the traditional posture for a rabbi at that time – and he continues the lesson that he's started a few verses earlier. What's key to remember here is the purpose of this trip. Why is he in the house with these guys? Verse 31: “he was teaching his disciples”. This is a very intentional time of spiritual formation for Jesus and the twelve. They have removed themselves from the crowd, and he is focusing his efforts on teaching the leaders now. They have said “yes” to his invitation to follow. They have become his disciples. Now he is going to help them to understand more deeply what that means. He mentions four key lessons that disciples have to learn.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last, and servant of all...” (v. 35). Jesus isn't saying that there's anything wrong with wanting to be first – he simply redefines what it means. We don't know whether he is taking a babe in arms or a toddler or an older child – and it doesn't really matter. What is important is that Jesus here deliberately identifies himself with the lowliest and the least

Jesus then instructs his followers to be welcoming to those who are on the margins – to refuse to use the same standards as the world does when it comes to deciding who is important and who is not.

That seems to strike a chord in John's memory, because then he tells Jesus about an encounter that a few of them had with someone else who was ministering in the name of Jesus. “We didn't recognize him,” John says, “So we told him to get lost. After all, he's not one of us.” Jesus cuts him off, and tells his followers that another mark of discipleship is an openness to believers who are different. If discipleship is about giving and receiving service in the name of the Lord, then we can't limit that giving and receiving to one particular “in” group of people who are somehow holier than anyone else. Look at the situation: John's problem is not that the man is ignoring Jesus – John is offended that “he is not following us.”

What a refreshing thing it is to hear the Master say, “You know what, boys? Following YOU isn't the goal. If he's following me, then don't get in his way. It may be that he and I have some business that you don't know about. Don't worry about it!”

Jesus then hones in on this point by making it clear that a mark of discipleship is being tender with those who are young in faith, or who are still learning to be followers. He says that we dare not do anything to get between Jesus and those who seek him. He refers to a method of capital punishment that was evidently used by the Syrians, Greeks and Romans. A millstone was a large

circular stone that was on a shaft, and turned by either human or animal power in order to crush grain into flour. The method of execution was simple – tie one end of the rope to the hole in the middle of the stone, and the other end around the neck of the criminal, and then throw both of them into the sea. As terrifying as this imagery of drowning is, says Jesus, it's better for that to happen than to lead a new believer into sin.

The last characteristic of a disciple, according to this lesson from Jesus, is that of self-discipline. This is the passage that has fascinated literalists for two thousand years. Clearly, Jesus is not suggesting that the antidote for sin is self-mutilation. The reality is that if my hand causes me to sin and I cut it off, I still have another hand free to lead me into sin. And even if somehow I could remove that hand, I could be a pretty good sinner with a couple of stumps. Jesus' point is that there is nothing that is more valuable to me, or to you, or to anyone else, than living life according to the Kingdom purposes. There is no good thing that is better than life the Jesus way. Once the disciples are clear on that, then, the warning makes sense: a life spent following in the footsteps of Jesus is a life that is in line with the ways that we were created.

Remember what Jesus is doing here – he is training his disciples to be followers. He is preparing them for what is to come. He is readying them for the ministry that will grip them for the next fifty years. And the way to participate in this ministry, he says, is to be willing to serve, to be open to believers who are different than yourselves, to take special care with those who are new to faith, or who are young, and to be self-disciplined and focused on God's purposes. If the disciples are able to do these things, Jesus says, then they will be "worth their salt". If they can't, then they will be worthless. And then the passage ends where it began – with a reference to the squabbling that had preoccupied his followers and a plea for them to be at peace with one another.

Beloved, I think that there is a word for us here. I'm not talking about cutting off any body parts, either. You know, there are a lot of times when something happens in the Bible and we say, "Wow, that's odd. I wonder what that's all about." You know, times where the culture is just so different, or the customs are so foreign that it seems to be a real stretch.

That is not the case here at all. The disciples are wrestling with a deep sense of pride. They have a desire to be first and foremost; they need to be right all the time; they are desperate to have control. Does that sound familiar? Is that me? Is that you? Is that the American church in 2010, or American culture in 2010?

Oh, we argue and argue about things that Jesus didn't say much at all about, and we get ourselves so worked up about those things that we don't have the time or energy to focus on the things that seemed to be central to his ministry. We, like the twelve, are more likely to waste the day arguing about some minor issue when we are walking by the chance to be a blessing for our neighbors. It's engrained in us...and the words of Jesus jar us into a new perspective.

Jean Vanier was a scholar who earned a doctorate in Philosophy in Paris, and then began to teach Philosophy at the University of Toronto. His whole life

was about being with the brightest and the best, with planning and anticipating and commanding others. And then the Lord called him to a new ministry, one where he spent his time living with and tending to the needs of people with profound mental and physical disabilities. He wrote,

[This] did not come easily to me. I had to change and change quite radically. When you have been taught from an early age to be first, to win, and then suddenly you sense that you are being called by Jesus to go down the ladder and share your life with those who have little culture, who are poor and marginalized, a real struggle breaks out within oneself...When someone has lived most of his or her life in the last place and then discovers that Jesus is there in the last place as well, it is truly good news. However, when someone has always been looking for the first place and learns that Jesus is in the last place, it is confusing!³

Beloved, Jesus is inviting us to follow him. With the disciples, he took some time in Galilee and asked them to focus on him before they got caught up in the turmoil of Jerusalem that was to come. He comes to us this Lent and wants to know, "Do you love me more than you love those things that I have given you? Do you love your neighbor more than you love your stuff? Do you love truth more than you love your own opinion? Do you love justice more than you love your own ease or satisfaction?" These are hard, hard questions.

I started this message by suggesting that there are times when we look at Jesus and say, "Are we supposed to take you seriously?" I think that the answer is that while we are not always supposed to take him literally, we must never fail to take him seriously. This Lent, may you and I help each other to grow in our ability to follow the Lord in these ways: to become willing servants, to be open and welcoming even when we disagree, to care for those who are on the margins, and to be disciplined in our daily lives. God bless you. Amen.

³ *From Brokenness to Community* (Paulist Press, 1992), p. 18, 23.