

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/22/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, September 22nd

Mark 9:30-37

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Discipleship truths

Jesus' emphasis during this final phase of His earthly ministry is an intensive period of teaching His disciples important truths. The rhythm in the text is becoming familiar – every time Jesus shares a further truth about the meaning of His Messiahship and thus a corresponding truth about discipleship, His disciples immediately demonstrate they fail to understand. This text is situated within a block of text bookended by two blind healings (8:27-10:45), bringing more attention to the continued spiritual blindness of His disciples. Last week, the cost of discipleship was revealed. This week, the standards of greatness for the Kingdom are revealed – something that contrasts with the culture around us. Which standards do our churches reflect and does this reveal spiritual blindness in our midst?

Mark 9:30-37 Commentary

The text follows the Transfiguration of Jesus (9:2-13) and Jesus healing a boy with an unclean spirit after the disciples were not able to do so (9:14-29).

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Jesus did not want His presence known because He intended this time for teaching His disciples important truths. While Peter, James, and John received another "private" disclosure of Jesus' passion prediction on the way down from the mountain of transfiguration (9:12), this is the second foretelling of His death and resurrection given to the whole body of disciples:

First Passion Prediction (8:31)	Second Passion Prediction (9:31)
<i>And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.</i>	<i>The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.</i>

The text is clear the disciples did not understand what Jesus revealed. Specifically, it appears to be the reference to rising after three days. Perhaps after what had happened to Peter the last time, the disciples were too afraid to ask – even Peter kept his mouth shut. This time there is only silence.

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

While v.32 specifically states the disciples did not understand what Jesus had just reinforced about what was about to happen to Him, the following verses reveal the extent of how the disciples still do not yet understand the nature of the Kingdom. The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them – a very worldly perspective. When asked by Jesus what they were arguing over, there is silence. Perhaps this indicates the disciples knew something of their error?

The momentous nature of this conversation is revealed by Jesus sitting down and calling the twelve to Him (v.35). It was a common practice for a Rabbi in those days to sit when he made a pronouncement to his scholars and disciples. So, Jesus here deliberately takes the position of a teacher making a crucial point. Jesus provides the standards for greatness within the Kingdom: *"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."* (v.35b) Jesus will shortly use this paradigm to describe Himself in what is one of the signature verses of Mark's Gospel: *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). The teaching continues. Jesus holds up a child who was the least in their society - less valuable than a slave. Whoever welcomes such as this is honorable. This is greatness according to Jesus.

Reflection and Application

Much like the culture faced by Jesus' first disciples, our society also encourages us to strive for personal greatness - only today it is in the form of elevating our social status. In our materialistic society greatness is often determined by wealth and social influence. We are naive if we think these worldly values have not penetrated the church. We are warned of the dangers of jealousy and self-ambition and how such jealousy leads to terrible infighting within the church (James 3:13-4:4). Christ is pleased to do the work of His kingdom through the Church. We cannot forget the dynamic between Christ who is the head of the Church as we are the body. Within our churches there cannot be room for the pursuit of worldly greatness. As Paul states in Romans, *"For the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned"* (12:3).

As disciples, we are called away from such worldliness and have been presented with a different ideal of greatness - one that frees us from the idolatrous chains of materialism and relentless competition and strife in our dog-eat-dog world. Ironically, the Church in the West is suffering not because of persecution but because of economic prosperity and societal freedom that allow us to self-actualize. By seeking to be the servant we actually become free. By focusing on the least of these we find a worthy purpose. By losing our life to Jesus, we find it. We must vigilantly guard our hearts against the pull of worldly greatness and must continuously examine our motives to root out pride and self-ambition. But let us not confuse meekness with weakness nor servant leadership with being a doormat.