

**Detail:**

After leaving a 19 year retail career with Kmart, I earned my real estate license and worked with HER realtors for 8 years. And one of the first things that they teach you, and that you will learn on your own if you're paying attention, is what are considered the 3 most important things that determine whether or not a house will sell. And you know these, right?

LOCATION - LOCATION - LOCATION. That is, it doesn't matter how nice a house is or what it's condition is if it's in a bad location. A beautiful mansion sitting on the edge of a toxic waste dump is not likely going to sell. And, the price of the house doesn't matter either, if it's in a bad location it's unlikely that it will sell. Condition and price only come into play IF the location is acceptable. But it doesn't have to be a toxic location. If you work in Westerville, living in Athens probably isn't going to work for you, regardless of how much more affordable housing is there. So, location-location-location is always the first consideration in real estate. And likewise, location is key to understanding this passage we read to you today.

Chapters 8-10 of Mark are at the center of this book and are the heart of this gospel. And Mark frames this section in such a way as to help us understand that.

Up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has been wandering his way around from town to town, teaching and preaching, and healing. At chapter 8, though, some things change. Chapters 8-10 are the hinge point in Mark's gospel - after this Jesus moves toward Jerusalem. And Mark frames this section with two stories of men without sight being

healed. Earlier in chapter eight is this story of Jesus requiring two attempts in order restore the sight of a man at Bethsaida.

*22 Jesus and his disciples came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch and heal him. 23 Taking the blind man's hand, Jesus led him out of the village. After spitting on his eyes and laying his hands on the man, he asked him, "Do you see anything?"*

*24 The man looked up and said, "I see people. They look like trees, only they are walking around."*

*25 Then Jesus placed his hands on the man's eyes again. He looked with his eyes wide open, his sight was restored, and he could see everything clearly. (Mk 8:22-25 CEB)*

After that event, Jesus gave the first of three announcements of his pending death and resurrection.

And you'll remember, Peter rebukes Jesus about this, saying this could NEVER happen, and is in turn rebuked by Jesus with the words, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Then in chapter 9, Jesus again announces his pending death and resurrection, and in response the disciples stick their collective feet in their mouths by debating among themselves which of them is the greatest, to which Jesus responds that "whoever wants to be greatest must be last of all and servant of all."

So then today, Jesus announces for the third time that he will die in Jerusalem but that after three days he will be raised, and now it's James and John who put their feet in their mouths. This is the same James, by the way, in Spanish "Iago," as in the Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James, from our film.

I know that we have many active and retired teachers in the room today, and I'm sure many of you - if not all of you - have at one time or another told your students that there's no such thing as a dumb

question. Well, James and John push that idea to the limit in this passage. Jesus announces for the third time that in Jerusalem he is going to die but that he'll rise again in 3 days, and what is it that they ask? "Can we sit at your left hand and your right hand in your coming glory?" Really? Are these ten year olds calling "shotgun" to sit in the front seat when they're getting in a car? Or, do they sense a power vacuum coming and they want to be next in line to lead the Jesus movement? I don't know, but this comes pretty close to being a dumb question. Jesus tells them that those places are not his to give - he must have been exasperated with them at this point.

But to give these "duh-disciples" the benefit of the doubt, perhaps James and John had a banquet in mind, sitting at the right and left of Jesus at the banquet celebrating his rise to power. The fact that Jesus responds with a reference to drinking the cup that he is to drink might suggest this. And at the same time, we don't want to be too hard on the disciples, because in Mark's Gospel, they represent us, and we don't always understand what Jesus is saying to us either, do we?

Similarly, James and John may have had a coronation or throne-room scene in mind with their request to sit on his right and left. If so, it is ironic that later in the story two bandits are crucified with Jesus, "one on his right and one on his left" (15:27).

Regardless, Mark closes out this center and central section with the healing of another blind man - Bartimaeus. And Mark reminds us that after all that the disciples had heard, seen, been a part of, they still don't understand - don't see - who Jesus is, what Jesus means, and what the role of the messiah will be. They just don't get it.

In today's reading, Jesus really wanted to be understood, but wasn't. And Mark does a masterful job of helping us to understand both THAT the disciples don't get it, as well as WHAT it is that they don't understand. The three times that Jesus tries to tell the disciples exactly what it means to be the messiah - contrary to what they believed - are framed by these two stories about giving sight to the sightless.

- *Jesus Heals a Blind Man*

### First Death/Resurrection Announcement

- Peter puts his foot in his mouth

### Second Death/Resurrection Announcement

- The Disciples put their feet in their mouths

### Third Death/Resurrection Announcement

- James and John put their feet in their mouths

- *Jesus Heals a Blind Man*

The two blind-men-who-regain-sight stories bracket these central chapters of Mark - what some consider the most important chapters in the Gospel. And in those chapters, the disciples three times show that they have ears, but do not hear what Jesus is really saying - have eyes but do not see who Jesus really is. Mark paints a picture, first by telling a healing story in which the sightless man at first only partially sees, mirroring that the disciples only partially see who it is they're following. Peter is the first one to name this -- Jesus is the Messiah of God. He knows this. He sees this.

But he doesn't know what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. The Disciples are the first followers of Jesus. They see him for who

he is -- the Christ — but don't see what it **means** for him to be the Christ. James and John get that Jesus is the real deal, but they don't understand the **nature** of the deal.

What's clear to the reader **of** this story, but not to the disciples as characters **in** the story, is that the disciples **think** they know who Jesus is and why he's come. But they don't - not fully. And because of that, they don't know what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus is, as he tells James and John after their request, a servant Messiah. And to follow a servant Messiah means to **be** a servant: "Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people." (Mark 10:44-45).

In our focus film, "The Way," we see many examples of a similar lack of understanding, or lack of vision. For example, Tom Avery, the main character, the father in the story, didn't understand his son or his son's desire to go on this pilgrimage. He didn't see or understand what Daniel was called to do, or who he was called to be. After Daniel's death, when Tom was in France, Tom didn't understand what drew Daniel to walk the Camino de Santiago. In fact, Tom didn't understand why **any** of the people who came to the Camino did so. And likewise, people didn't understand Tom's choice to walk the Camino either, instead of simply taking his son's cremated remains and going home. It wasn't just a lack of understanding or uncertainty that Tom was dealing with, though - there was also a level of fear he had to confront. Tom protested Daniel's choices and his leaving because he feared losing his son like he had just lost his wife. When Daniel died and Tom had to go to France to recover his body, his initial plan was to be gone for a week - afraid of leaving his comfort zone, his medical practice, his world, any longer than necessary. Once he did decide to finish the walk that Daniel started, Tom feared opening himself to those he met

along the way. It took him a long time to see that these were people in pain, people who were struggling, people whom God had placed along his path, along his way, just as he had been placed along theirs. Recognizing the fear and misunderstanding of the characters is crucial to understanding what happens in the film, as well as what happens in our scripture.

We're not always understood - and we don't always understand. Jesus found this out, just like so many, whose closest family, friends and neighbors have preconceived ideas of who we are, or ought to be, and cannot imagine the possibilities God has called us to.

In chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, Jesus' own family doesn't really understand who or what he's about - suggesting he's out of his mind. But sometimes, understood or not, we must go ahead and do what we dream, claiming who we know we are, taking the way around what others think we ought to do and be. Jesus does this. Even though the disciples, and most of his family, didn't "get it" until after the resurrection, Jesus had to work around that. And so do we.

The disciples also look for a way around Jesus' teachings. He tells them what's coming and it's as though Peter, James and John mimicked the "see no evil, speak, no evil, hear no evil" monkeys - trying to distance themselves from the reality of who Jesus is.

Their own preconceived ideas of what the messiah would be was much more comfortable for them than what Jesus told them would be the case. But even more, ~~their~~ ideas about what it meant to follow this messiah were more about their comfort. They expect greatness, which James and John think comes from status and power. In response Jesus says that greatness comes, not from power, but by

becoming a servant to others, and then points out that there's no escaping service. You'll either willingly, even joyfully, serve others, or you'll become a slave to the illusion that you can be free, and can secure your future, through status and power.

It's fascinating how Mark structures his Gospel, using these stories of Jesus healing blindness as the top and bottom bun to sandwich the meat of the three pronouncements of his impending death, the disciples' failure to understand, and Jesus' ongoing teaching about what constitutes greatness. As much as Mark includes parables in his Gospel, Mark can in many ways be read as a parable in its own right. I think Mark tells the story this way because he knows that Jesus' words – indeed, his whole life! – run contrary to our natural tendency to think about power, leadership, and all of life according to the world's terms. That takes time to sink in. We only see partially.

Like the disciples, we don't often get it either.

In essence, Jesus asks them and asks us, “who will you serve?” As a culture and species, we value freedom...and accomplishment...and autonomy...and self-determination...and... the list could go on. Which is why, if we slow down and take this question seriously, we'll recognize how much it grates against our deeply held beliefs and challenges our culturally formed sensibilities. And as hard as it is for some Christians to hear, one of the ways that we work around following Jesus' way, is by worshipping him. Jesus never asked anyone to worship him - he asked us to follow him. We worship God - we follow Jesus. But it's much easier to worship Jesus than it is to follow him, to actually do what he told us to do. After all, worshipping him only takes an hour or so each week; following him demands much more - our life.

Yet perhaps one of the most pernicious illusions of our culture is that we are, indeed, free and autonomous beings who can live independent of all bonds of loyalty, devotion, and service. In fact, it's ironic to consider the amount of time and energy we expend in service to – yes, in service to – the idea that we don't have to serve anyone.

This assertion – that we'll always serve something or someone whether we know it or not – is at the very heart of not simply today's passage but much of Mark's Gospel. And we don't like that. So we look for a way around - a way around our fear, a way around our misunderstanding of what Jesus is calling us to do or to be, fear of loss of control or independence, fear of what it means to become a servant, a disciple. We look for a way around some of Jesus' more difficult teachings, about selling and giving, about loving our neighbors, and turning the other cheek. These are just some of the things that cause fear, uncertainty, and misunderstanding in our world, in our lives, and in our faith.

Self-scrutiny is part of the Way of Lent, but we don't observe Lent for the sake of self-scrutiny alone.

To sit too long with the guilt and shame of our misdeeds, or with our fears and uncertainties would, in fact, go against the gospel message of grace. Christ's message is love, forgiveness, new life and new hope, so Lenten self-scrutiny must serve *this* purpose. To arrive at newness of life, we must first name the parts of our lives that are shrouded in darkness, the parts of ourselves where life does not flourish. So instead of finding a way around, we walk through some of our muck so that we can leave it behind us and find Easter joy beyond.



So this week, as you come to the table of grace, I invite you to face your fears, your uncertainty, your misunderstanding. Hopefully you have your Lent stone for the journey with you - if not, you can grab one out on the table in the narthex. Grasp that stone tightly in your hand, and as you come to the table, feel the fear and the anger, the uncertainty and misunderstanding excrete out through the palms of your hands and into the pores of that stone. Allow your anger, your dismay, your guilt, or whatever negative emotions or baggage you're carrying right now to soak into that stone you have in your hand. Think about these things, pray about these things, and as you come forward in a little while to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation, allow those things to seep into the stone even as the love of God fills you through the bread and the cup. Allow the body and blood of Christ to fill in the spaces that right now hold your fears and failures, your misunderstandings and uncertainties.

In explaining his being a servant messiah, Jesus described his life as "to liberate many people." We might understand that, in part, as Jesus rescuing us or liberating us from our delusion that we are somehow self-sufficient, independent, self-made men and women. From this point, his whole life – including his self-sacrificing death – challenges not only our assumptions but the very powers that be, with the surprising and life-giving revelation that it's in giving of ourselves, losing ourselves in service, that we find ourselves living more fully than ever before. It's an example and sacrifice that, in Mark, is about following Jesus' way to the cross.

For Mark, the true answer to the question of who Jesus is, or "who do you say that I am?" is not found in the empty tomb but on the cross. It's in following Jesus to the most difficult of places, doing the most difficult of things, and serving the most difficult of people that we

encounter Jesus for who he is and how he is, and how we learn what it truly means to be his follower. The only way around our fear, our certainty, to be healed of our blindness, is to serve as Jesus served; love as Jesus loved.

If we see Jesus – not as a Messiah whose sole mission, sole intent, is to go to the cross so that we don't have to, but as the one who calls us to **follow him on his way to the cross** – Mark's telling of the good news of the gospel will move us from a personalistic and benign approach to discipleship and toward a daring, self-giving, life-filled approach to discipleship that models what Jesus calls disciples to be. Let those who have eyes see. Amen.