

Mark 9:30-37

30They [Jesus and the disciples] went on from there and passed through Galilee. He [Jesus] 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 [the disciples] did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33Then they [the disciples] came to Capernaum; and when he [Jesus] 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 [Jesus] 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."

In the name of Jesus + Amen.

Maybe it's just me, but I have never been part of a church that was without controversy, arguing, conflict, ladder climbing for status, egos that get in the way; have you?

If anyone raised their hand, I was going say, "Please tell us your secret, or better the name, address, and time of worship of such a place."

A church without controversy, argument, conflict, ladder climbing for status, egos that get in the way. Does a church without any of that exist?

Apparently in Nashville, TN it does. Well, at least according the church name and sign. Across from Tennessee State University in Nashville there is a congregation that has the longest name on a church sign:

*The House of the Lord, Which is the Church of the Living God, The Pillar and Ground of the Truth, Without Controversy, Incorporated.*<sup>1</sup>

A church without controversy, arguing, conflict, ladder climbing for status, egos that get in the way! Whoever heard of a church without all those things?

"The truth of the matter is, the people of God have always been and probably always will be a contentious lot, given to fussing with each other about all sorts of things, some of which matter and most of which don't."  
(Delmer Chilton)

And that's where we find ourselves in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus finds his disciples arguing or discussing, pondering, reasoning as the word is also translated; with one another about who was the greatest.

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<sup>1</sup> Delmer Chilton

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Who is the greatest or who is greater? As if faith were just a competition.

They are having this conversation with one another, right after Jesus had told them that as the Messiah he would have to suffer, die for the whole world and that to be his followers, they would have to “take up their cross” as well.

He presents them with a reversal of riches, honor, and status compared to the world’s standards. And yet, they still don’t get it. They still struggle for status, and honor based on the world’s definition.

“Who’s the greatest” as if faith is a competition – and I know a lot of people who think that is true. Maybe that is why Jesus asks a question rather than making a statement. “What are you discussing?” “What were you talking about?”

The disciples fall silent and don’t answer. Maybe, it’s because they didn’t need to. Jesus knew. And, like a patient teacher or loving parent, Jesus invites them to sit with him, lean in, learn once more about the work they are called to, the reversal of the kingdom economics, and what servant leadership looks like.

**“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all?”**

Last of all? Servanthood? Cleaning up the streets late at night, changing beds and bedpans at the hospital of dying patients, scrubbing pots and pans at a restaurant you otherwise never would be able to afford to eat in.

And to give answer to the disciple’s question of greatness, Jesus performs what could possibly be the first children’s sermon in all the gospels. He literally puts a child in the middle of the disciples and this child becomes the object lesson.

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Jesus provides a dramatic illustration so that none of the teaching's power is lost. Placing a child in the midst of the Twelve, Jesus puts his arms around the child and invites the disciples to measure their greatness against that of a child.

**"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."**

With those words, Jesus provides the ultimate great reversal. There were many times when I was growing up that children were to be seen and not heard. It was way worse in Greco-Roman times. Children were symbols of absolute powerlessness, possessions, even at times commodities.

"It is interesting to note that the Greek words for child and servant have the same root and that Jesus used both of these images; child and servant, as symbols of who the messiah is and who we, the followers of Jesus, are called to be in the world. Children and servants, powerless and defenseless ones, that's us." (Delmer Chilton)

But we know that our modern world, gives highest honor and respect to those with power and authority and importance. People see positions of strength from which they can control and manage others.

And the call of the Gospel to us today is the same as it was to those to whom Jesus spoke personally. It may be that way in the world, but it must not be that way among you my followers.

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It may not be possible for the church to be the church and be without controversy. On the other hand, just because we have controversy, it is not necessary that we forget what it means to be followers of this one who bids us to take up our cross, follow, and welcome those that the world deem a controversy or unwelcomed.

As Christians who hear today's gospel, we are called to live our lives differently. Our actions are called to put great value on the very things our world sometimes deems worthless.

We are called to offer hope to those who have been denied hope, raising our voices on behalf of those whose voices are not heard. We must embrace them as Jesus did even the littlest child, the snot nosed child, the annoying child, the loud child, the angry child, the hurt child.

For me, the power of today's gospel is what it calls us to as a **Church. How do we live our lives differently as a worshipping community differently because we hear Jesus' words not only with our ears but also with our hearts?**

How do we live and build community by our willingness to be last and to serve others? How does the church embrace the gospel's wisdom and stand apart from the world's wisdom, which would have us striving to be first, best, and greatest?

**"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."**

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Maybe, just maybe we do this as the church – the Body of Christ, by making our welcome more than what we put on our church signs, and more of how we live out of baptismal vocations as God’s disciples in the world.

Maybe it looks like welcoming one such child,

-one such refugee,

-one such GLBT person who has never been told that God loves them for the creation they are.

-Maybe it looks like welcoming one whose economic inequality never allows them a place at the table or a roof above their heads.

-Maybe it looks like the church standing at walls that divide nation from nation, person from person, and helping to build those walls into tables of conversation and mutual love.

“Through his teaching about the great reversal, the call to child-like-ness, to servant-hood, to powerlessness and humility, most of all through his own humiliation and death on the cross, Jesus has shown us the way forward through our disagreements and controversies.

Rather than aspiring to power and influence and control within the world and within the community of the faithful; our calling is to seek to be servants of one another, actively loving each other in the name of the one who first loved us.” (Delmer Chilton)

May it be so! Amen.