

Oct. 14, 2018

Mark 9: 30-37

Prayer: Dear God, grant us understanding of your holy Word and travel with us into its meaning. We want to please you, but we must understand the Scripture to do so. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Disciples 'R' Us

Henri Nouwen was an influential Catholic priest who wrote more than 40 books on spirituality that are studied in seminaries. He had advanced degrees in both psychology and theology. He taught at Notre Dame and Yale Divinity School and Harvard.

He marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, and he expressed solidarity with the liberation theologians of South America. He lectured all over the world.

And when he was 54, this brilliant writer and teacher and thinker moved into a community for the severely mentally disabled in France. After a year, he moved into another community for the severely disabled way up in Canada. And there he stayed.

He spent the last 10 years of his life ministering to people who could not possibly appreciate his brilliance.

I find that an amazing thing. You spend all that time developing your mind, getting your education and your degrees and your fame, and then you go to live among people who cannot applaud your accomplishments.

Jesus' disciples wouldn't have understood Nouwen either. They understood fame and greatness and acclaim. They did *not* understand humility and sacrifice, and most emphatically, they did not understand death.

That's why the disciples are such a critical part of the gospel story. They are us. We have seen the misunderstanding and the doubt and the confusion ... and they are us.

In the gospel of Mark – who, by the way, is the writer who's toughest on the disciples - - Jesus predicts his death three times. And every time, the disciples act as if Jesus is mistaken or wrong, or maybe babbling dementedly to himself.

We call these “passion predictions.” Passion is our church word for Jesus's last week of suffering and death and resurrection.

And every time Jesus mentions his suffering and death – every single time -- the disciples obliviously turn their attention to a grandiose, human kingdom. A kingdom they're looking for despite all of Jesus's teaching to the contrary. A kingdom that I fear too many evangelical Christian leaders are looking for today in their eagerness to cozy up to political power.

Today's Scripture passage is the second passion prediction. Let's turn in our Bibles to **Mark 9: 30-37** to take a look.

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for 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.'

32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'

34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

36 Then 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.'

Jesus is telling a pretty consistent story here. But no one is listening.

“They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” (v. 32)

Have you ever done that? Have you ever put off going to the doctor because you were afraid of what he might say?

Have you ever put off asking your pastor about a particular sin, because you were afraid she might say, *“Yes it is sin! Stop that!”*

The disciples were afraid to ask Jesus about his statement because it was so very, very clear. **“The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him....”**

(v. 31)

But it gets worse. Instead of asking Jesus what he means, what such a loathsome message of humility and sacrifice is all about, they begin to argue with each other on the way to Capernaum. Later, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, and they won't say.

They will not admit they were arguing about who was to be the greatest among them.

Rabbinic writings from this period speak frequently about the order of seating in Paradise. The rabbis wrote that "the just" would sit closer to the throne of God than the angels would.

So this is what the disciples were arguing about: *"I'm more just than you!"*

"No, I'm more just! I sit closer!"

Their reluctance to tell Jesus the subject of their argument lets us see that at least they were embarrassed. They may not have totally understood Jesus's passion prediction, but they suspected it didn't involve greatness on their part.

In all three passion predictions, Jesus speaks of rejection and suffering and death. And all three times, the disciples answer by speaking of status and prestige.

Jesus speaks of giving up his life. The disciples speak of fulfilling theirs.

Jesus counts the cost of discipleship. The disciples are busy counting the rewards they hope to reap.

It is hard to read this passage without seeing what is being played out on our national stage. For me, one of the most disturbing components of the last two turbulent years has been the rhetoric of some Christian evangelicals. People who lead our churches and Christian

ministries who are so eager to be seated beside power that they turn their eyes away from adultery, sexual assault, separating immigrant families, racism, dismissal of the stranger. They turn their eyes away from virtually all the teachings of Jesus.

It is impossible to read this passage about Jesus's disciples without confronting the same behavior in today's purported disciples.

They are willing to give up the moral pillars of Christianity for those they perceive as friendly to their agenda. It is the ultimate case of the ends justifying the means. And that is never going to be right.

We cannot gloss over leaders and representatives who cut moral corners, who trample Jesus's teachings to get what they want. As I have said before, even Billy Graham, at the end of his life, lamented that he had gotten too close to power in his friendships with presidents. And he never came close to the pronouncements of some of his clergy colleagues or his son. But he recognized the temptation of blurring truth when it came into opposition to power.

So how did Jesus answer his disciples when they did the same? After the first passion prediction in chapter 8, we read that **“Peter took (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him.”**

Peter told him he had it all wrong. Jesus, in turn, rebuked Peter. He *really* rebuked Peter. He called him Satan.

But then he said this: **“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”** (Mark 8: 35)

After the third passion prediction in chapter 10, we read: **“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ ”** (Mark 10: 35-37)

Jesus is talking about mockery and flogging and death. And James and John hear ... an opportunity for personal glory.

Jesus assures them they don't know what they're asking. Then he tells them about servanthood, tells them that he who would be greatest must be the servant. He who would be first must be the slave.

In today's Scripture, after this middle passion prediction, Jesus does something a little different. He invokes a visual aid by taking a child in his arms.

Now children in those days didn't represent innocence or potential, or all the glorified ways we think of children. Along with women, children in the first century represented the most powerless, most disposable members of society.

They were the ultimate “least of these.”

That's why Jesus' quote here sounds so familiar: **“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me”** (v. 37)

It sounds very much like Jesus' description of Judgment Day in the book of Matthew: That's when the righteous will say, **“ ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave**

you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ” (Mt. 25: 37-40)

This child in Mark’s gospel is the “one of the least of these” who is to be welcomed.

Not stripped from his parents and placed in a detention center, as evangelical Christians look on approvingly. We must stand up and say we are not a part of that. That is not consistent with our understanding of the gospel.

Nor is casual adultery. Nor is sexual assault. Nor is racism in all its myriad manifestations.

Jesus’s demands of service and servanthood don’t come easily to us. Human nature wants to be the boss, not the servant.

It was the same in the first century. The Greek writer Plato wrote, “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?”

The disciples were simply thinking as we think. They wanted Jesus to be the boss, and they wanted to be high-ranking lieutenants.

That’s why their presence as characters in the gospels is so valuable. They provide the eyes for us to see how rare and strange Jesus truly was, how he turned the natural order

upside down, how he made service to one another the ultimate act of worship. They hold up a mirror to us.

They continually and optimistically looked for Jesus to usher in a kingdom in which they could take their rightful places – *if he would just stop talking about suffering and dying*. Maybe if they could just ignore him when he talked like that, everything would be OK.

Heaven knows they tried.

Heaven knows we try.

We decide the way the country should go and then leap to put a sword in Jesus's hand to lead the way, trampling on everything he taught in our haste to get there. But history tells us it never goes well when the church hooks up with the state. There will always come a reckoning. There will always come a pay day.

Instead, over and over, Jesus spells out the path we are to take: **“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”** (8: 35)

“Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

(10: 43-44)

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me....” (9:37)

His instructions are very clear.

And after the resurrection, the disciples understood them.

Henri Nouwen, laboring among a disabled population who couldn't possibly recognize his brilliance or his fame, understood them.

But do we?

Amen.