

Mark 9:30-37

30 And they went on from there and passed through Galilee, but he (Jesus) did not want anyone to know it;¹ 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them that, “the Son of Man is to be handed over into the hands of men, 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 about it.²

33 They came to Capernaum, and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”³ 34 But they remained silent, for on the way,⁴ they had been debating with one another who was

¹ Part of the intent of this verse may be that Mark is emphasizing Jesus’ desire to have some intentional one-on-one time with his disciples; especially in light of the discussion they have been having on the way.

² This is the second time within Mark’s Gospel that Jesus mentions his impending betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection. In Mark 8:31-33, as Jesus elaborates on this, Peter jumps cuts Jesus off by rebuking him only to be rebuked in return. Now like dogs with their tails between their legs, the disciples say nothing. “Jesus’ disciples react to his prophecy of death and resurrection with silent bewilderment, but are afraid to ask about it...On a narrative level, the disciples’ reserve may partly be a response to what had occurred in 8:31-33, where Peter protested Jesus’ first clear passion prediction, only to find himself, and by implication, the rest of the Twelve, roundly rebuked by Jesus. The Markan disciples may not have become more enlightened since then, but they do seem to have become more gun-shy (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2009), 669).”

³ After traveling a number of miles, Jesus and his disciples make their way to Capernaum. If you’ll recall, Capernaum is the hometown of Peter, Andrew, James, and John; the first four disciples called by Jesus to follow. The home that they are staying in is more than likely the home of Peter, the same home where Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law in Mark 1:29-31.

Once they are inside the house, Jesus asks his disciples what they were arguing about along the way. It is interesting to note that Jesus could have asked the disciples what they were arguing about at any point in their journey, yet he waits until they arrive in Capernaum and settle down for the day to pop the question. Why does Jesus wait until this point to ask his question? What is the motive that lies behind it? Clearly there are two elements bubbling beneath the surface of this scene. First, prior to the disciples’ argument, Jesus has been instructing them again on what it means that he is the messiah. Clearly they do not yet grasp the gravity of the situation that Jesus points to. Second, the disciples do not yet grasp the full reality of what it means to be disciples. What did Peter’s mother-in-law begin doing following her healing? She immediately began serving Jesus and his disciples. In this way, through the grace and mercy of Jesus, she becomes a disciple in her own right, putting the needs of others before her own. Contrast this with the disciples’ unflattering and self-aggrandizing argument about being the greatest. Remembering Mark 1:29-31 and the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, we are set up for Jesus’ words in the following verses.

⁴ There is a repetition of the phrase “on the way” in this verse and the one preceding it. If you recall, when looking at Mark 8:27-38, I mentioned that this phrase works on two levels. At one level it seeks to report that Jesus and his disciples are traveling. But at another level, it is a reminder that they are “on the way” of God’s glory. Preparing “the way of the Lord” has been a theme from the very beginning of Mark’s

the greatest.⁵ 35 Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, let them be last of all and servant of all.”⁶ 36 And taking a little child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, 37 “Whoever receives on child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.”⁷

Gospel and so we are reminded when we see this phrase that Jesus’ journey is about the way of the Lord. “This repetition of ‘on the way’ is another instance of Markan irony; God’s way, ‘the way of the Lord,’ which has been the Gospel’s subject from the its opening verses (1:1-3), and which is a particularly prominent theme in the present section of the Gospel, is, as we shall immediately learn, a way of selfless service, of putting oneself last, in order that others may be benefited and God’s triumph may be announced. The disciples, however, have chosen another way, a path of self-promotion, which is not the way of the Lord; their ways, then, are not God’s ways, and their thoughts are distant from his (Marcus, 680).”

⁵ Being so familiar with the Gospel stories, it’s easy for us to sit back, hear this passage, and think to ourselves, “those silly disciples, why would they argue about something like this after hanging around Jesus so much?” The reality is, the disciples discussion is entirely logical and makes sense within type of society they were living within.

“The discussion of relative rank within the group of disciples is not merely a matter of their personal egos, but reflects the conventions of Hellenistic society in which stats and honor were very important. It was taken for granted that people would be concerned about their rank on the social ladder. Likewise, rabbinic discussion and documents from the Qumran community indicate that discussion of relative rank in the kingdom of God was a matter of authentic piety (Eugene Boring, Mark (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006), 280).” Anyone of us in their position would probably be worries about the same types of discussions. While we no longer live in an honor shame society, we do assign places of honor to those we respect and admire and often within corporate structures of various types we defer to those who have been within an organization for a number of years out of respect for their office, but also out of respect for their tenure.

⁶ “Confronted with their shamefaced silence, he sits down, thus assuming the characteristic posture of the ancient teacher, and launches into a discourse that engages precisely the issue they have been debating. Jesus does not condemn the disciples’ desire to be preeminent, but takes it for granted; the issue is not so much whether one should want to be great as the manner in which true greatness is to be achieved. The answer Jesus proffers is that, in the upside-down logic of the dominion of God, the person who want to become first must make him-or herself last of all and servant of all (Marcus, 681).” At this point is unavoidable to have the image of Peter’s mother-in-law in the back of our heads as we realize that in the moment of her healing and restoration, she truly became last of all and servant of all.

The Greek word that stands behind the word servant is diakonos, what we have come to refer to as a deacon. Within the church we have retained the ministry of deacons, this is not necessarily what Jesus is referring to in this passage. Rather, Jesus is speaking of the role of a diakonos in that society. A servant was the lowest-of-low, waiting on tables and serving everyone else their meal before eating themselves. While to our egos this way of thinking is deflating, the reality is, this way of living is not only freeing but allows an opportunity to bear witness to the way of our Lord and Savior who has shown this to be the way of God in the world.

⁷ We hear these verses and we often think to ourselves, “O Jesus just loved the little children. Look how wonderful Jesus is with the little children. How could anyone want to crucify Jesus after he was with the little children?” When we look upon Mark’s passage we need to strip away our 21st Century ways of

thinking and understand what the significance is within this moment as it relates to Jesus' words of servanthood and discipleship.

First and foremost, we need to understand that in taking a little child and placing it the midst of the disciples, Jesus is acting out a parable. "In the first-century Mediterranean world, the characteristic feature of children was not thought to be their innocence, but their lack of status and legal rights. Jesus is not teaching a lesson about being childlike, but speaking to the issue of status. Embracing children, contrary to their cultural evaluation as nonpersons with no 'rights,' was characteristic of the historical Jesus and early Christianity, who accepted the least and the lowly without asking what benefit they could receive from such people (Boring, 281)." Children were viewed as nonpersons within the ancient world because they could add nothing to betterment of society. In effect they had no rights, not privileges, and especially, no status. In effect, Jesus is using this little child who is consider the lowest of low by societal standards to emphasize the need to be a servant of all. Second, in receiving this little child, in essence be a servant of all, is to somehow receive Christ and in this way to receive the Father. In caring and serving those who can't care for themselves, we are wrapped up within the mystery of who God is towards us in, through, and as Jesus Christ. No cute and cuddly image of Jesus basking in the joy of little children; rather offering an enacted parable to understand the way of discipleship here and now.