

March 7, 2021  
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Text: Mark: 9:33-37  
Title: Who is the Greatest?



Listen with me to this story from Mark's gospel

<sup>3</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>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." *But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him* Then they came to Capernaum; and when they were in the house Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way *they had argued with one another about who was the greatest*. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

May we hear what God's Spirit says to each of us today.

Embracing silence, making time for contemplation, listening for that still small voice of God, speechless in awe and wonder, can be moments of God coming near can be marked by the beautiful Sound of Silence when Silence is Golden. But silence is not always beautiful or golden or an indication of God's whispering.

A teacher steps out of a classroom just for a second, he returns to find utter chaos has exploded into mayhem. He asks, "who did this?" Silence is the only reply. A parent hears rambunctious children in their bedroom followed by a booming crash, she enters the room and asks, "what happened?" Silence is the only reply.

Did you hear the silence in the scripture today? Twice. It wasn't the still small voice of God or the moment of awe and wonder kind of silence either. Jesus has just told the disciples *again*, that he will be killed by those who oppose his message. This is the second time in Mark's gospel that he has done so. Mark says the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying, but were afraid to ask. Why were the students afraid to ask their guru a question? When we were in high school, kids I knew in band were afraid to ask the director a question because he was known to throw music stands at them. Those I knew in sports didn't ask the coach a question, because he'd make them run laps and make fun of them while they did so. But it doesn't sound like Rabbi Jesus throws things at his students or makes fun of them, so that's not it. If the hesitance to ask the question is not about the teacher, must be about the student? Why were the disciples afraid to ask a question? Wad they not paying attention? Where they afraid they had missed what the teacher just said? They don't want to 'look dumb' asking a question he had just answered? Is it an ego? a pride thing?

Next is says the the students are talking amongst themselves. Jesus has walked on ahead, or maybe sent them on ahead. When they get back together at the house, he says, 'Hey, what were you guys talking about on the road?' The only reply was silence. I think their silence was because they did know the answer; they knew what they were saying was wrong. Their silence was guilt. The truth is they were fighting about whose going to be in

charge since Jesus seems determined about dying. They were fighting about who would take over as leader of the Movement if- when- Jesus gets killed. Which of them is primed to step into command? Which is the greatest among them?

Their preoccupation with status and power must have been a disappointment to Jesus, but Jesus doesn't fly off the handle. He doesn't throw things at them, give them a time out or make the run laps. He doesn't ridicule, shame or blame. Jesus sat down (the posture for teaching in that day) gathered his students around him and taught the same lesson again saying, "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The puzzled looks on the disciples faces only grew deeper.

Jesus is a great teacher. A master teacher brings the lesson to his learner's level. This lesson calls for a visual aid. Jesus places a little child in their midst. He takes the child in his arms to teach...

Wait a minute. Red flag. Cultural context moment screaming here. Today we give no thought to a man holding a child. Uncles, fathers, grandfathers, babysitters, nephews- men hold children and care for them in our world. Dads are expected to care for children today.

But Jesus lived in a different culture , 2,000 years ago. The image of Jesus, a first century man, holding a child in his arms is subversive. Jesus holding up a child as a person to be welcomed is outrageous— to imply that a child is to be emulated - even more outrageous.

They were arguing about who was the greatest! Did someone say ego? pride? (and what's next?... a little child...object lesson time) Jesus demonstrates about the first being last by just holding a child in his arms. Jesus has placed himself in the position of a woman or a servant, for those were the people who took care of children.

Children are not locked into the story of their ego. They are still becoming. Children ask plenty of questions, because they know that's how you learn stuff. Children have not yet laden themselves with a guilt story. Toddlers aren't embarrassed about who they are. They poop, burp, laugh, cry, and scream honest emotions. There is no pretense, no guilt about small children. It just is what it is: pre ego. Jesus says let go of the ego that you needed, that you created in order to be acceptable. First you needed it, now you can grow up beyond it and know you are acceptable because you are, because God is. When you do, then you will know (welcome) the child in you, and the child in you ( soul without pretense) will know me, and the soul without pretense will know the Creator.

Our ego is useful for a time, but it can get in the way of learning. It can get in the way of serving others. When we catch ourselves arguing about who is greatest, we know our ego is driving. Egos prevent us from seeing God and loving all. The illusion of ego tells us that we are separate from one another. Jesus teaches to let go of illusion of separateness and see things with open, honest of childlike wonder so you can see Christ is all, we are all one. Then when we see all as one we can serve one another not from positions of power over, but from unity and love.

In the Greco-Roman world of Palestinian Jesus, there were masters and servants; husbands and wives, parents and children. The master, husbands and fathers had power. Servants, wives and children had none. Servants were at the bottom of the household hierarchy, only ahead of children. Jesus redefines greatness in terms of service to others. In order to serve others, you have to have a 'little come to Jesus' time with your ego.

The male disciples argue about who will be greatest and have the most power; Jesus gathers into his arms a child. Show me greatness by welcoming this child; by serving this child. Show me how great you really are by showing me how and who you serve.

People today might understand this outrage a little better if we modernize it a bit. what if the story read: Jesus took a Mexican refugee into his arms and said, whoever welcomes one such as this, welcomes me and the one who sent me.

Jesus took a gay pastor into his arms and said

.... whoever welcomes this one, welcomes me.

Jesus took a homeless veteran into his arms ....

Jesus took a black youth into his arms and said....

Jesus took a troublesome Middle Schooler into his arms and said....

Jesus took a sex trafficked ..or an alcoholic or a drug abuser...

or welfare recipient ... or undocumented family and said,

... whoever welcomes these, welcomes me and the one who sent me.

Jesus invites his followers and his leadership team to journey into a new place and new understanding of power and service. Jesus invites us to do the same. Whom will you serve? Where will you serve? Where will you carry forth Jesus message that welcomes all? Where will you be part of the life and ministries of this congregation? For wherever you serve, there you welcome Christ.

Amen.