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Bridge Street United Church  
September 22, 2024  
Readings: James 3:13 – 4:3; Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37

### Challenging Expectations

Today's reading from Mark's Gospel appears to deal with three different things—Jesus telling his disciples that he must suffer and die, his disciples then having an argument among themselves about who was the greatest, and finally Jesus setting a little child in their midst telling them that those who would welcome a child were those who welcomed him and those who failed to welcome a child equally failed to welcome him. Yet, all three things are related. They were related to the expectations Jesus' disciples had, expectations Jesus challenged. From our perspective, after all we know how the story goes, we don't share those particular expectations, or at least not all of them. But I think Jesus' challenges our expectations, too. So I want to talk about this passage of Scripture, for there is more to it than initially meets the eye, both the nature of the disciples' expectations that Jesus challenged and our expectations that may be equally challenged.

I want to make two preliminary observations. First, today's lesson, like the gospel lesson for last Sunday, comes from a section in Mark's Gospel that begins about midway through chapter 8 and concludes at the end of chapter 10. This section of Mark's gospel begins with Jesus healing an unnamed man who is blind, and it ends with Jesus once again healing a blind man, in this latter case a man named Bartimaeus. In this section of about two and one-half chapters, Jesus on three occasions tells his disciples that he must suffer and die. One wonders whether Mark intended a subtle comment here about the blindness of Jesus' disciples in the way he arranged his material with these two episodes of Jesus healing a blind person framing the three instances when he tells his disciples he will suffer and die.

Second, I have mentioned before that each gospel writer has a particular theme or approach to telling the story of Jesus' life and recounting some of his teachings. One characteristic of Mark's Gospel is that the disciples, Jesus' most immediate followers, consistently come across as obtuse, wooden-headed, dumb—take your choice of words, but in Mark's Gospel the disciples are a most undiscerning lot.

So, given that background, I want now to comment on some aspects of today's reading from Mark, chapter 9. That lesson begins with Jesus again telling his disciples that he will be betrayed, killed, and after three days rise again. When Jesus had given them this same message a little earlier, in an incident recorded in Mark, chapter 8, Peter had rebuked him. In this instance, Mark tells us that the disciples "did not understanding what he was saying and were afraid to ask."

"They did not understand what he was saying." We probably puzzle over their lack of understanding. As I noted a few minutes ago, we know how the story goes and how it ends. They did not. More significantly, and in fairness to his disciples, the idea that the Messiah would suffer and die was an almost impossible thing for them to get their heads around. In Jesus' day, the long-promised Messiah of the Jewish tradition was understood to be a figure God would send, a figure who would defeat their enemies and restore the kingdom of Israel. God, through this figure, would defeat all the "bad guys," if I might use that phrase, and, in the context of Jesus' day, most certainly send the Romans packing. The Messiah was seen as a great and powerful figure, a descendant of King David who would rule with justice and equity. The Messiah would rule. The Messiah would not suffer and die.

With his words about suffering and dying, Jesus was challenging, and challenging in a most fundamental way, his disciples' understanding of the concept of the Messiah. While, as I noted a little while ago, Mark consistently portrays Jesus' followers as not understanding, not getting it, I have

real sympathy for them in terms of their struggle with what Jesus was saying to them. Jesus' words were an almost incomprehensible challenge to their expectations of what the Messiah would do.

The last time Jesus talked with them about the Messiah suffering and dying, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him; these things cannot happen to you was Peter's initial response. This time, Mark tells us, "They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask." They knew enough to know that telling Jesus he was not going to suffer and die was the wrong answer. None of them wanted a replication of Peter's experience when he had told Jesus earlier that Jesus was wrong, that suffering and dying was not what happened to the Messiah. But the challenge to their deeply held convictions about who the Messiah was and what the Messiah would do made it almost impossible for them really to get it. And, as Mark notes, they were afraid to ask.

So they continue on to Capernaum. When they are inside a house there, Jesus asks the disciples what they were arguing about on the road. They are silent. They had been arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus "sat down, called the twelve," and told them that the one who would be "first must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus then sets a "little child" in their midst and takes the child in his arms. Jesus tells them that whoever welcomes such a child welcomes him and whoever welcomes him welcomes the one who sent him. This time Jesus challenges their expectations about what it means to be great.

Now we sometimes think about this story of Jesus setting a child in their midst and taking the child in his arms is a story about Jesus' disciples trying to discourage folks from bringing little children to Jesus and Jesus rebuking them and asserting that those who would receive the kingdom of God must receive it like a child if they are to enter it. That is a Biblical story found in Mark's Gospel and also in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Mark's Gospel, that story is found in chapter ten. But it is not this story. This story has a different point to make.

This story is a follow-up to the argument Jesus' disciples were having about who was the greatest. After saying that those who would be greatest needed to be last and be the servant of all, Jesus then puts a little child (note "a little child") in their midst, picks up the child, and comments that those who welcome a child welcome him and those who welcome him welcome the one who sent him. In the society of Jesus' day, children were seen very, very differently from the way we now see children. Unlike our world, where we value children highly, in Jesus' day they were seen as the least. Probably two factors led to that valuation, and I use the term "valuation" intentionally. On the one hand, many, many children died before reaching the age of five. So, one did not invest a lot emotionally in a young child who had a high chance of dying as a little child. Secondly, people in Jesus' society were valued by their wealth or by the related measure of their economic capacity. Young children, a "little child" in this case, had no economic value and little economic potential until the child had survived that difficult period of those first few years and had a more likely chance of teaching the teenaged years and adulthood. It is a very different way of thinking about, and valuing, children from what we do now in our society.

But knowing how society in Jesus' day valued or, more accurately, did not value, young children makes Jesus' response more clear for us. In response to the disciples' argument about who was the greatest, Jesus talked about the greatest being the one who would be servant of all and then he set one of the most marginalized members of that society, not our society, of course, but that society, in the disciples' midst. You want to be the greatest, Jesus is saying, then you need to welcome, to care for, those who are most marginalized. When you do to that, when you welcome into your midst the most marginalized, you are welcoming me.

Here again, as with the disciples' understanding of Messiah, Jesus is challenging their understanding and their related expectations. They had no sense, as we possibly might, that a little child had status and importance. So, when Jesus sets a little child in their midst and says what he

says, he is indicating that those who would be greatest must serve the most marginalized in their society, must be the servant of all. It is an immense challenge he poses to them, as he upsets their sense of who has status. The highest status belongs to the one who serves everyone else. Jesus said this in a society that valued honour and wealth to an even greater degree than our society does.

So, what expectations of ours does Jesus challenge? Probably not what the Messiah is like. We don't hold that same understanding that ancient Judaism did. But we may struggle with trying to hold together a central Christian concept of Jesus being both fully human and fully divine—human like us, but also fully divine, fully God. Certainly for most of Christian history people have struggled to do so. In some periods of time, the emphasis has been on Jesus' divinity, indeed so strongly on Jesus' divinity and on what divinity must look like, that there has been a denial of Jesus' humanity. He only seemed to be human, for some Christians. At other times, and I think from the late 1960s through to almost the end of the twentieth century as one such time, the emphasis on Jesus' humanity was so strong that the idea of his divinity was almost lost. Certainly musicals like *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, musicals from the late 1960s or early 1970s, musicals I thoroughly enjoyed, emphasized Jesus' humanity very strongly. So did the powerful 1989 movie, "Jesus of Montreal."

When it comes to our understanding about who is greatest, we probably find ourselves closer to the disciples' experience. It is not that we see status or greatness in exactly the same way they, or their society, did. In Jesus' day and world, status was largely equated with wealth. It was a world with almost no middle class, a world where a few were very rich, and almost everyone else was very poor. It was a society where wealth and honour and status were sought. Indeed, Jesus comments, and comments negatively, about those who seek honour and status, who seek the highest places at a meal. In our world, they would be the ones who want to be at the head table at a prestigious gathering.

In Jesus' society, serving others was not a mark of status. Attending to the needs of those who were marginalized was even less a mark of status. Attending to the needs of those in our society who

are marginalized is similarly not something that gains one status in our society. This congregation has made it a point for many years to try to attend to some of the needs of some of the most marginalized members of our community. Some, perhaps even a good number, in this city respect us for that. But few in our wider society would see it as a sign of your greatness or status that some of you volunteer in the kitchen or in other ways support the Drop-in that currently operates on this site. Our society, too, gives a person status for other things.

This passage from Mark's Gospel is a call to consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It reminds us of the need to think about the expectations of being a follower, and of how challenging those expectations can be. If they are challenging, and they are, we may remember that the one whom we seek to follow has also promised to be with us in the midst of those challenges, strengthening and sustaining us in them, promising to be with us in our time as that one has been with those down through the centuries who have sought to follow. And it is to that one, to the God we have come to know most fully through him, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of God with us now and with us always, that we offer praise and thanksgiving, this day and always, Amen.

### **Resources**

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4 (West 2009.minster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009).

Black, C. Clifton. "Commentary on Mark 9:30-37," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/> [Accessed September 17, 2024].

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