

Mark 9:30-37

September 20, 2015

Inside Out and Upside Down
A Sermon by Beverly A. Zell
Delivered at Hope Church, Holland, MI

The invitation in this morning's gospel reading is to walk alongside Jesus and his disciples as they make their way toward Jerusalem. It's a long journey, filled with ups and downs.

Earlier, they stood on a mountaintop with Jesus as he spoke with Moses and Elijah. They witnessed miracles like feeding 4,000 people with only seven loaves of bread and a few fish. And they heard with their own ears Peter's bold confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed One Israel has long-awaited.

But there are perplexing and disturbing moments on this journey as well. Jesus talks about death and resurrection. He tells them that to gain their life they must lose it. It's not the kind of talk you expect given everything they've seen and heard. In fact, at times it seems Jesus and his followers are reading from different maps. This morning's story is a good example of how differently they imagine the future.

Once again, Jesus tries to talk with them about what awaits him in Jerusalem: betrayal, death and resurrection. They remain confused by his words. Yet they hesitate to ask questions. It's possible they fear a rebuke like the one Peter received when he balks at such unpleasant talk. Or, maybe they are simply afraid of the answers and what it might mean for the glorious future they dream about.

Whatever the reason, they become absorbed in measuring their own greatness, especially in relationship to one another. Who could blame them? Indeed, they believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

They invested their lives in following him, leaving behind their livelihood and their way of life. Now, as they watch his popularity grow, and witness miracles and wonders, they begin to think about what the future might hold for them. They are his inner circle after all. Surely, they will hold positions of power in the kingdom they anticipate.

When they get to Capernaum, Jesus asked what they argued about on the way. We surmise the question made them uncomfortable because they grow quiet. Then Jesus, seizing a teachable moment sits down and invites them to join him.

Right away, we know something important is coming, some lesson that we too might want to hear. And so we eavesdrop from a distance, hoping to learn more about how greatness might look in God's Kingdom.

We know Jesus is clearly a gifted teacher. But his lessons are often difficult. They take us out of our comfort zone, away from life as we live it, inviting us to see the world as God imagines it. It's a vision that is at once life-giving and yet radically countercultural.

On this day, Jesus teaches that if what they want out of life is to be first, then they need to be last of all and servant of all. To illustrate his point, he takes a little child into his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me."

It's tempting to view this passage through our own cultural lens which may bring to mind Sunday School images of flannel graph boards, brightly colored pictures of a smiling Jesus surrounded by little children and singing hymns like Jesus Loves Me. It's a sweet picture. But to look at it in the historical context of its original setting is to encounter the hard truth of what Jesus is saying.

Unlike the homage we pay children in most of Western culture, they were devalued in the time of Jesus. They were possessions of their fathers, more like servants who ranked on the lowest rung of the social ladder, alongside widows, slaves, peasants, the infirmed and those cast out as unclean. In fact, the Greek words for child and servant have the same root. Simply put, they were nobodies.

So with dreams of a future in which they might gain power and prestige, Jesus tells his followers that if it's greatness they seek, they need to be last of all. They need to be servants not masters.

He turns their expectations and assumptions upside down while at the same time offering a new and provocative image of what the reign of God will look like. He challenges not only the twelve, but everyone within hearing distance to resist and struggle against forces that favor power and privilege to the detriment of the powerless.

We may not consciously aspire to greatness. At least we don't discuss it openly with our friends and colleagues. And yet, how often do we unconsciously compare ourselves—for better or worse—to others. We want to know how we measure up.

And yet, despite such human tendencies, many of us truly long to be faithful and just in the eyes of God. We genuinely seek to live a life which is “gentle and merciful. . .faithful and sincere. . .lovers of peace. . .willing to take the last place.”

It’s interesting to note in this short but powerful passage, not only what Jesus says, but what he does: According to the text, he takes the child in his arms. He embraces this little one that symbolizes all those across time and space who dwell on the margins of life. It’s an embrace that raises the question of whether something more is required than a simple welcome.

I believe that “something more” occurs in this church. You worked with Good Samaritan Ministries to launch Neighborhood Connections. And so fully embraced its work you gave it space and personnel so it might flourish.

You welcomed the LBGTQ community and then you took the bold step of offering sacred space so they too could know the joys of married love. You engage in missions not simply by sending a check but going there yourself to work alongside the people in Haiti, Chiapas and Greenpoint church in New York.

Author and historian Diana Butler Bass refers to “A New Spiritual Awakening” that’s occurring in churches around the country. She speaks about trends in belief and practice that are shaping an “awakening of faith.”

She tells the story of being invited to speak at a church in the Northwest as part of a fall worship series on “Awakening.” When she arrives she discovers the church has been preparing for her visit in a variety of ways, most notably through the work of various artists who were assigned the task of illustrating what it would be like for the church to be awake.

Her host invites her into the sanctuary where she shows her a communion table 18-feet in length. Instead of being positioned in the front of the church as it was traditionally, the table was placed so it ran down the center aisle—into the heart of the congregation.

As Diana admired the beauty of the woodworking on the table, her host called her attention to the 13 chairs. Each of the chairs was decorated for someone who was not there. One chair was a seat designed for a disabled child. One was a chair made so that children with cancer would have a place at the table.

There was a chair for those who were homeless. A chair of welcome for the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who had lost an arm or a leg. There were chairs for people of different ethnic backgrounds and different racial groups.

There was a chair dressed like a woman in a veil. A chair for those in the LGBTQ community. And there was a chair for Jesus at the head of the table. Thirteen chairs, each one uniquely different from the other. Perhaps that is what embracing is about. Maybe it means pulling up new chairs to the table.

The road to Jerusalem and the cross is long and there are many lessons yet to be learned along the way. When we take the long view we can see that until Pentecost the disciples missed much of what Jesus taught them.

Some argue they never did grasp the fullness of his teaching. But lest we be too hard on them, it's good to remind ourselves that we are like them in many ways. For us too, the road of discipleship is long, costly and often perplexing.

Jesus gives his life for us and all those marginalized by the world. He asks that we give our lives too, that we gather up our gifts along with our desire for recognition, honor, prestige and power and bring them to the cross where we might know the transformation and glory that comes only with death and resurrection. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol. 4

The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B

Embracing the Faith, "Spiritual Awakening," a 5-session study with Diane Butler Bass