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“Ordinary Disciples”

Mark 9:30-37 | *Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=216102748>*

We all want to know what goes on “behind the scenes.” We want to see people for who they really are, when the mask is off and the veil is dropped; when the public face is replaced with an image of people just being themselves, warts and all. There is a dark side to this reality, a desire, sometimes, to feast off of other’s troubles and missteps, to encourage conflict, to invade privacy. But this truth is all around us. From reality television, to bestselling memoirs, to those tabloid newspapers that line the aisle in the grocery store. We want to know what’s going on behind the scenes. We all want the *real* story.

News headlines of the last two weeks have been flooded with stories that take us behind the scenes. We’ve seen blurred images of the British royal family captured by cameras in Vegas and France; photos that immortalized moments that were clearly believed private. And we’ve seen and heard footage of Republican candidate Mitt Romney speaking at a Florida fundraiser where he speaks of the “47 % of Americans who will vote for Obama,” whom he says are “dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it... These are (he says) people who pay no income tax.”¹ As news commentators, late-night talk show hosts, and the American public are trying to make sense of the ethics reflected in these stories, and the ethics reflected in these stories going public, it is clear that in a culture filled with iPhones and global Internet access, we have an unprecedented ability to catch a glimpse of what goes on behind-the-scenes.

In our passage for today, we catch a behind-the-scenes glimpse of Jesus and his disciples as they travel and talk together. The writer tells us that Jesus left Galilee with his disciples so that they could escape the public eye, for Jesus knew that his disciples needed some alone time with him. Looking back over the ninth chapter of Mark’s gospel (*read Mark 9 online at <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=216103137>*), we see that glory of the Transfiguration has given way to some disappointment. Jesus is reminded over and over that, despite his teachings, the disciples just don’t seem to get it. Sure, they follow, and, yes, they try, but the ninth chapter of Mark is peppered with misunderstandings and misspent efforts. For example, we learn in the verses just before our passage for today, that the disciples couldn’t drive out an evil spirit on their own, and are mired down in their own questions and insecurities. So Jesus takes his disciples away from the crowd to focus on them for a little while.

Yet even in our text for today, in the midst of this holy get-away, we read of more misunderstanding. We see the stuff that the disciples would likely want to keep hidden, the behind the scenes accounts that they’d want left out of a reference check. In these brief verses of our text, we get a 21st century peek at a conversation that the disciples wanted, even, to hide from Jesus. We read that, once again, the disciples have missed the point. As they travel along the road, on retreat with Jesus, their conversation is



checked with argument as they disagree over who among them is the greatest. Rather than focusing on Jesus and on the journey with him, their energy is directed to themselves and to questions that they think matter: Who is the most cherished disciple? Who is the most talented? Who has greatest favor with God? We don't hear any of the conversation itself, but as disciples ourselves, we know what it was like. Just like conversations throughout God's church today, they were likely debating whose gifts outshined the others, whose prayers were the most effective, who had the best way with people, who was welcome and who wasn't, whose gifts were meant for ministry, who was loved by Jesus the most.

Jesus, like a good parent, sits his disciples down for a "talking-to." But he doesn't call them out in a way that breeds shame, and he certainly doesn't feed into their debate. He deflects attention away from them, in fact, and points them to a paradigm for greatness that distorts cultural perception. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. says, in his sermon on the Drum Major Instinct, Jesus:

"did something altogether different. He said in substance, 'Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be important. You want to be significant. Well, you ought to be. If you're going to be my disciple, you must be.' But he re-ordered priorities. And he said, 'Yes, don't give up this instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right. It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do.'"²

Then Jesus calls a little child to him, and embracing this child, reminds them of God's great love for those whom society deems the least and the lowly. Jesus calls a little child to himself, and embracing this child, reminds the disciples that greatness is achieved through hospitality, through servanthood, through vulnerability. Jesus points to this child as a paradigm for his own ministry: as the one who emptied himself to serve; who welcomed strangers and sinners; who became vulnerable, even to the point of death on a cross. Jesus calls this little child to him, and embracing this child shows the disciples the qualities that they need to hold on to: the qualities that make a difference in the world, the qualities that tap into the Divine initiative in and for the world. The child in Jesus' arms becomes the lesson to the disciples for all they should be and become.

Anne Lamott writes:

I knew that children could teach you how to pay attention, but by the same token so can shingles, and I knew that children gave you so many excuses to celebrate, only half of them false... Children can connect you to the child inside you, who can still play and be silly and helpless and needy and capable of wonder.³

And so Jesus hoped that the child in his arms would show the disciples how to pay attention, to connect the disciples to the child inside of them--authentic and needy, hopeful and real, vulnerable and open to all that is possible in the world: all that is possible with God.



This message is an important one for us. In a culture where we define ourselves and others according to class, and things like age and race and occupation and identity and political affiliation, we are all too familiar with the compulsion to present ourselves to this world in light of the power we hold. And even in those places in our lives where the world doesn't give us much power, we stand on the truth of our own inner strength and inherent value as we boldly assert that the cultural power that demeans or deadens is no power at all. It's grounded in fear, in weakness, in hate.

We know that for ourselves, like the disciples, our desire to be a part of something bigger than ourselves—to really belong—is often complicated by values of this world. Cultural dynamics of politics and money and race and gender and sexual orientation creates grades and slopes on what should be a level playing field, transformed by God's gracious love for us in Jesus Christ. Our desire to belong becomes distorted by these cultural sources, so much so that we sometimes feel that our ability to belong is somehow connected to a need for others to be left out. We are fooled into thinking that our own worth comes from moments in our lives when we are in the spotlight, when we are set apart, when we are served.

And to the disciples—and to us—Jesus shows us another way. He affirms that yes, it is important to belong to something bigger than one's self, but that belonging isn't about leaving out: it is about welcoming others in. He celebrates the unique giftedness of those he has called to himself. He teaches, however, that the gifts are not so that we might be set apart, one from another, but so that by contributing what we offer, we might participate in God's work of justice and peace. He shows his disciples the Divine truth: that greatness comes from service; that power comes through vulnerability, and that the best way to experience God's love in all its fullness is through the act of welcoming and loving others.

Like those gathered in this behind-the-scenes conversation, we find discipleship to be complicated. Our desire to follow Jesus is intermingled with our desire to be successful in this world, to be set apart; our desire to follow God's will is all mixed up with our own desire to follow our own ambitions, to achieve more than others, to gain the type of attention so relished by this world. We try to put our best face forward so that we can show how great God is by making sure that others know just how great We are. And, like the disciples, we try to hide these ambitions and selfish motives. We save our arguments for behind-the-scenes conversations, or for gossip with a friend, or a cutting remark.

We are afraid to admit our struggles, to deal with them out in the open, just as we are afraid to fully open our arms and our hearts in humble obedience.

But see, Jesus never calls us to be more than we are. Looking back, we see that he doesn't ever clothe his disciples with super-hero powers or try to prepare them to campaign for public office. Jesus' disciples never need to be the best and the brightest. After all, he chose fishermen, prostitutes, and tax collectors to be his followers. He just asks his disciples—he just asks us—to be ourselves: ordinary disciples anointed with an extraordinary grace, won for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't want us to try to pretend to be anything more. He doesn't want us to posture



and vie for attention. He wants for us, in our strength and in our weakness, to give Glory to the God who in love made us, redeemed us, and who sustains us each day.

I'll be honest. Jesus' time with the disciples doesn't get any easier. In the very next chapter he revisits this same conversation again, as James and John ask to be seated next to him in glory. But the good news for them is the good news for us: Jesus never gave up on his disciples, and he never gives up on us. He just keeps reaching, inviting, teaching, and loving so that, in some moment of grace, we might get it, knowing that our value comes from God's love for us and our call is to share that love with others. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-watson/mitt-romneys-47 percent b_1892544.html?utm_hp_ref=elections-2012](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-watson/mitt-romneys-47-percent-b_1892544.html?utm_hp_ref=elections-2012)

² The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "The Drum Major Instinct" Delivered February 4, 1968.

³ Lamott, Anne. *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*. p 184.

