

“Welcoming the Child”
Mark 9:30-37

I think we all like to have things explained to us as simply as possible. We live in a time that has seen the rise of an entire genre of books called “How to” or “Advise” books. We think that there ought to be ten easy steps to everything, ten easy steps to happiness, ten easy steps to success, ten easy steps to lose weight, ten easy steps to achieve your wildest dreams, ten easy steps to win friends and influence enemies, ten easy steps to find the perfect mate, ten easy steps to quick smoking, we could go on and on.

For a long, long time I thought that there ought to be ten easy steps to be a Christian, and there are many books and tapes that try to boil our faith down to a simple formula, and I know there is much to be said for that, but I find all of those leave me ultimately feeling as if something vital is missing.

This gospel passage begins with Jesus asking his disciples to focus on his teaching, and he lays out the pattern about as simply as you can, “The Son of Man, he says – now let me stop there for a minute Son of Man is a couple things, it is a title for Jesus, but it is more than just a title, it is a title that means something, Son of Man means that this person is the one who will show the rest of us what it truly means to be human; this person will embody the heart of who we are created to be.

So Jesus says, “The Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands and they will kill him – who will kill him – I don’t know about you but I always get nervous when I hear discussion refer to “they”. I get a little nervous because “they” is such a generalized term, it is easy to throw around, it is a very broad target and it alleviates us of being specific, but it is often a way of throwing blame around in a very general way, but in this case when you read Mark as a whole, when you read the New testament as a whole, when you read the Bible as a whole “They” is very clear – “They” is all of us – there is no they out there that we are not a part of, “They will kill him, and three days after they kill him, he will rise again.”

There is the entire passion story right there. That is the entire story of just how far God will go to express God’s love for “they.” But this gospel is a very different kind of calculation. It doesn’t add up. The disciples didn’t want to understand it and before we marvel at their slowness we need to look at our own reluctance to live by its calculus. Every once in a while we meet a person or see a circumstance or read a story that illustrates this gospel truth.

I read a story that was both inspiring and at the same time very unlikely which I would classify as an ‘Easter moment.’ The story is about a Chinese woman in her fifties who had endured an abusive marriage for years until her husband unexpectedly abandoned his family to be with a much younger woman.

The wife said, 'At first I was very ashamed but then I was able to stand up to him—I kept the restaurant we owned and said he could keep the house,' she explained. 'Then he went back to China with his mistress.'

“The story did not end there. Though the woman had built a new life for herself, putting her children through school while she also began to attend college, an unexpected challenge presented itself: she received a phone call from China informing her that her ex-husband had been involved in a drunken brawl and was now lying in a coma in a hospital in Shanghai. *'Immediately we went to China,'* she said—*'Me, my two daughters, my son—'*

She was telling this story to some friends at college.

“No way!” someone interrupted. *'After the way he treated you?' 'Yes,'* she continued. *'I asked his mistress if she planned on staying with him through the long recovery. Since she said No, I told her to pack her bags and leave us alone. It turned out he had a brain injury so we had to wait in China until he could fly. Then we brought him back home to the U. S.'*

“So he is back in your house?” they exclaimed in unison. *'Yes. Everyone said I was crazy, but there was no one to take care of him. I did not want to bring him home, but something inside me said this was the Christian thing to do. He has his own room and goes to daycare when I am at work; he cannot take care of himself anymore. We are not married and I do not want to get married again—to anyone. I am living my own life so I am happy ... ’”*

“I have hardly done the story justice. It was far more complex and amazing than the abbreviated version I have reconstructed; however, even in this format, I hope you heard how the Chinese student’s loving response to her ex-husband’s predicament defies all logic and normal calculation. She not only forgave him but also became his caregiver at a time when she was just beginning to enjoy her independence. And she did this as an expression of her faith in Jesus Christ ... In listening to her narrative, I hope you encountered the Risen Christ.”¹

But the disciples just did not get it, and I believe that their resistance to understanding is right where the rest of us are as well. We may be inspired by the above story but I doubt that many of us would think, “Oh, I hope I get to live her life!”

But on the other hand, all of us know what it is to want to be first. Even Children know what it means to be first—first in line, first chosen for the team, 1st Place in the Science Fair. No one likes to be last. The “last” are sometimes thought of as “LOSERS” or the “weakest.” We all want to be #1—the greatest, the best, the most successful. Why wouldn’t the disciples feel the same way 2,000 years ago?

¹ Elizabeth Ann Stewart in *Sunday Bibletalk*, April 26, 2009

Jesus is challenging them and us to think differently; he begins with a simple Question. He asks, “What were you arguing about?” We could just stop right there for a moment, “What are you arguing about?”

The disciples have been basking in the experience of being part of this entourage—following a great teacher and miracle maker throughout the countryside. Life is exciting for them — throngs of fans following them. Walking down a dusty road, this rag-tag bunch of men jockey for position and compete with one another as to who would be “the greatest” in this kingdom that their leader keeps talking about. While on the road, Jesus had been telling his friends what was about to change. It was time to head toward Jerusalem and what awaited them there. He was going to be betrayed and put to death. They weren’t paying attention as they arrived at the house in Capernaum. *What are you arguing about?* Jesus is unimpressed by the disciples’ need to know who is the greatest. When he questions them, he is answered by silence.

Then he gathers them together. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Listen carefully, Jesus is not talking here about achieving, or succeeding, he is talking about being, he is talking about much more than what we do, he is talking about who we are – whoever wants to BE first MUST BE last of all. And SERVANT OF ALL, not servant to all, but servant OF all.

There is much here to contemplate. I can’t help but think that he is lifting up the spiritual principles of humility and anonymity, a shared willingness to be a part of something greater than ourselves, letting go of our need to outdo others, to be in competition with others but to come to a profound realization that being a disciples of Jesus Christ means to merely take our place, to stand in a long, long line of faith.

Perhaps Jesus would have us wrestle with a familiar saying, “Saving the best for last” or perhaps we would do well to remember another saying that “If you don’t care who gets the credit then there is no limit to what can be accomplished.”

The only response that Jesus got to his question was a lot of blank looks. So Jesus found a child and set him amongs them, and Jesus embraced the child. Why a child? We don’t know why; we don’t even know if the child is a little girl or a little boy. What we do know that in the ancient world that children had no status whatsoever. They didn’t produce anything; they did not contribute anything.

We would like to think that we have come a long way since then and in many ways we have but even today children have far less of a voice than other segments of the population. But Jesus puts the child right at the center of the community of faith – the voiceless one, the one with no influence, the one with no lobbyists advocating for them, the ones who don’t have access to legal representation to assist them in getting documentation, the ones struggling with health problems but being denied access because of our fear, all the ones at the

margins and Jesus is saying to his disciples, to all generations of faith that true greatness is achieved by making the margins of the community, those who are considered illegal, those who are considered expendable, those who are LOSERS the new Center, why? Because that is where God most richly dwells, the last shall be first.

Another story.

There was a very wealthy man who owned a priceless art collection, including a number of old masters that were the envy of many art connoisseurs. This same man also had a son he loved very much, and the two often used to enjoy their art treasures together.

However, war broke out, and the son was drafted, and went off to fight. One day, a telegram arrived informing the father that his son had been killed in action. The old man was devastated. He grieved silently, alone, and very deeply. A few months went by, and one day there was a knock at the door. A young man stood there with a small package under his arm. "You don't know me," he said, "but I knew your son very well. We were in the same unit, and I was with him when he died. I am the soldier he gave his life for. He saved many lives that day, and he was carrying me to safety when the bullet struck him. We had become close friends, and before he died, I drew this little picture of him. I'm not a great artist, but I want you to have this sketch now."

The father was silent for a long time, gazing into the eyes of his son that looked out from the soldier's sketch, his own eyes filling with tears. Then he thanked the soldier and offered to pay for the picture. "Oh, no, Sir. It's a gift. I can never repay what your son did for me; but I want you to have the sketch. It's all I have to give."

The father hung the sketched portrait above the mantelpiece for everyone to see. He treasured it far more than all his other paintings together, and he showed visitors this rendering of his son first before anything else in the house. Not long after, the old man passed away himself, and his art collection was put up for auction. Art collectors came from all over the world, thrilled at the possibility of buying one of the many treasures. The auctioneer began the bidding. The first picture to come up was the unknown soldier's sketch of the father's son. "What am I bid for this first picture in the collection ... ?" he implored.

There was silence. No one seemed interested in the amateurish sketch. The auctioneer then explained that "the deceased insisted that the first item in the sale had to be the picture of his son. Now who will make the first bid?" Tentatively, a hand was raised at the back of the room. It was the gardener. He had worked for years for the old man, and he also had loved the son. He made a modest bid that had no counters. Everyone else looked bored.

“Sold!” called the auctioneer after counting to three. “To the man at the back, for \$10.” There was relief all around. Now the buyers could get their hands on the truly valuable pieces of the collection! But the auctioneer laid down his gavel. “The auction is over,” he declared.

“My instructions from the deceased are that whoever takes the son receives the entire estate, including the whole art collection. The man at the back who took the son receives everything.”²

So the questions remain for each generation of faith. What are you arguing about? Who will welcome the child? Who will embrace the ones with no voice at the margins of society? Who will take the son?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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² told by Margaret Silf in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories*, Pilgrim Press, 2003