**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Tiffani Harris

*“The Great Ones”*

Mark 9:30-37

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Growing up, my younger brother and I often resembled the two children in the Judy Blume book: The Pain and the Great One. The Great One is the older sister who is constantly annoyed by what The Pain, the younger brother, can get away with doing. He is the cute kid who seems to have the later bedtime than she did (can any older siblings relate?) *and he* gets dessert after dinner even when he doesn’t eat his green beans – because he is so cute. She always had to eat her green beans. The Pain, on the other hand, is enamored with The Great One always disturbing her and messing up her things just to get a rise out of her – oh, it brings meaning to his life. She is great in his eyes and worthy of profound pestering. In the book they each think that their parents love the other child more. They both just want to be greatly loved and they are convinced that the other child is the preferred one. Through their antics, the reader realizes that no matter our age, **we all crave importance and recognition in some way from someone.**

Our middle schoolers and high schoolers can especially relate to this as they are surrounded by a culture clamoring to be on top and they have to learn to survive in it – who has the highest grade point average, who is first in the class, who gets picked first in the pick up games, who made the A team, who is on the select team, who is first chair, who got the award, what’s your class rank, who is in the “in crowd” and who are the “others.” **This may seem like a 21st century problem, however, even our disciples experienced a similar cultural value of ranking.**

In my own life the antics between my younger brother and me were strikingly similar to those of The Pain and The Great One. Some of the most notable arguments we had, happened on our long family road trips, and they were often about who crossed the imaginary line in the back seat of our tiny 1983 Nissan Sentra. (In my mind, it was as small as a mini cooper) Of course, being the older more intellectually developed sibling**, I found it important to take these moments of line crossing as teaching opportunities and impart wisdom to my brother about respecting boundaries** -- to which he would quickly and zealously put his fingers in his ears and yell “I can’t hear you!” over and over again ensuring that he could not possibly hear what I was saying. He would not be held responsible for any important information I was fervently trying to impart.

In today’s passage from Mark, we encounter the disciples on a journey and road trip of their own and we wonder if their fingers are in their ears! Traveling from Galilee to Capernaum with Jesus, he pulls them aside and begins to teach them in secret -- they have a lot to learn. Christ senses the urgency of preparing them and predicts for the second time:

*“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” . . . He is saying,  “I will be handed over . . .” this is new information . . .*

Having previously warned them: *“If anyone has ears to hear let them hear. . .”* **Jesus was hoping for a dialogue about what his impending death means for all of them** – for how they should live and serve. Yet the disciples seem to have their ears clogged. They are preoccupied with their desires and plans about who is the greatest, the next leader and the most revered. They are jockeying for position in this rag tag band of followers that have been thrown together to form a new family. As in any family, egos and self-seeking desires clash. **Add a long road trip to the mix and they just may have brought out the worst in each other.** This talk about death made no sense for the kind of Messiah they had been taught to expect. They had little imagination for understanding how Jesus’s death fit in to the plan of the new kingdom.

*Mark tells us next, “They did not understand (what Jesus was saying) and were afraid to ask him”*

Avoiding and resisting, they are fearful to ask clarifying questions. “What does this mean Jesus? We don’t want you to die! What do you mean resurrection? Will someone betray you? -- None of this! These fellow travelers changed the subject and started a debate. Maybe they wondered who would be in charge if Jesus left. The transfiguration had just happened and only three went to the top of the mountain. Would they be in charge next? But then none of them could cast out the demon of the boy when they got back down– so who was worthy to lead? **These recent experiences show that the disciples’ track record is not very good**. Peter got it wrong at the Transfiguration and he got it wrong when he rebuked Jesus about suffering during Christ’s first passion prediction. They misunderstood the leaven of the Pharisees and argued about forgetting the bread -- they aren’t exactly getting A’s in Discipleship 101. No wonder they were hesitant to respond to Jesus’ strong and scary prediction*.* Or maybe they do not like change and the thought of Christ’s death seemed so enormously upending that denial was the best option. Either way, they missed an opportunity for discipleship with their Lord.

Though he had important information to impart and it fell on deaf ears, Christ was not deterred. As they were walking on the road, he noticed their bickering and another teachable moment. Waiting for just the right time, he later asks them

*“What were you arguing about on the road? They kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was greatest.”*

With misplaced energy, the disciples debated about the wrong thing and missed the point. *James 3:16 reminds us that “where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder . . “* **And in the midst of the disorder that seems to surround this bunch,** I have compassion on the disciples. Three years with Jesus is a short time to transform entrenched constructs and now Jesus is saying that he is going to leave them. In their avoidance, they revert to the familiar standards and arguments -- who will be in charge and who is the greatest. Egos are tough to maneuver and sometimes they are hidden behind our ideas. We are not all that different. We see these same struggles in our relationships with our families and fellow travelers. Balancing our needs with our call to serve others is not simple.

**Cognitive dissonance is the difference between what we think and believe with what we actually do. It is the state of inconsistent beliefs and attitudes**. The disciples are learning that the way of Jesus is a way of self-denial and yet their actions demonstrate incongruence. We recognize this dissonance in ourselves too**. We believe in seeing others as Christ, yet we walk over them with our words and attitudes. We believe that all we need is Christ, yet we want and work for more.** And like the disciples we may be distracted and even push our own agendas at times. **What might Christ be saying to us that we are missing? If we lay aside our distractions and open our ears, we might hear the personal and corporate call of Christ, saying:** Follow me, You are loved, Tend my sheep, Let go of your treasures, I am enough, Trust Me, Serve with humility.

Sensing the disciples were now ready to listen, Christ sat down and drew them near.

*In response to their argument on greatness, he said this is how you follow me: “The last shall be first and the first shall be last and servant of all.”*

He casts a new vision of greatness: **the greatest are the ones who serve**. This humble servant-hood is,

“James 3:17, *peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits”- as James reminds us.*

This declaration of true greatness foreshadows his last night with the disciples, where Jesus modeled being servant of all as he washed their feet. **This calling to serve is for you and for me-- for we are all disciples.** It requires looking outward, to building up of community. This relational, incarnate way of humble servant-hood is inconvenient and essential. Our families and those closest to us, our fellow travelers, often bear the brunt of our inattentiveness. How God calls us to serve is different for each of us. It might mean serving a

**loved one after you have said hurtful words,**

**maybe it is praying for someone who has hurt you,**

**or serving a neighbor or community that you disagree with,**

**maybe it is sharing mercy with a family member who has wounded you**

**or letting someone else get the attention and be “first.”**

What might it be for you? We all have disagreements, tenuous relationships, bruised egos and relational wounds that make serving difficult. Our serving often begins with our thoughts and prayers. A simple prayer that can rise to the surface in moments of inner struggle as we try to serve, is the prayer, “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me.”* **We call for God’s mercy and compassion to transform us and overflow into action.**

Prone to bickering, this blended family of disciples on a long journey had many opportunities for inner transformation and growth. This isn’t the first time Christ caught them in a dispute and it will not be the last. (Garland, 366) **As Jesus corrects the disciples, we stand corrected too. Like the children of Israel’s grumblings were a lesson for generations to come, so the distractedness of the disciples remind us how often we get it wrong and how often we are distracted by our own noise and notions** to the neglect of those around us and our community. (Williamson, p. 167-170)

Augustine of Hippo understood this and daily experienced the reality of our human nature in his small community experiment. After his baptism in 387 he gathered members of his family, his closest friend and some students to live together for the **purpose of growing and sharing in the Christian life.** **Knowing that they did not agree on much of anything**, Augustine created a simple “rule” or mission statement to guide their interactions. It wasn’t lengthy or detailed but professed that they were bound by their fundamental calling to **love God and neighbor.** Augustine insisted on living in harmony placing inner transformation as a priority and valuing **community life** over self. (Villanova) **He saw our human tendency to favor our own ego, ideas and importance as a major obstacle to developing unity and living the Christian way.**

In a practical demonstration, of what it means to let go of ego and serve, Jesus

“*took a child in his arms, he said to them,****37****“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes not only me; but the one who sent me.”*

Insignificant on the honor scale children were vulnerable and without influence. In response to the seemingly childish bickering of the disciples, placing the child among them makes the admonition unmistakable. **Jesus is picturing a community of humility and mutual submission where serving others proves to be an equalizing force. The word welcome is used 4 times in this verse – highlighting our posture to God and others.** Jesus has redirected the attitudes of the disciples that have lead to conflict and **challenges them** to serve in humility welcoming the vulnerable. In this upside down descending economy of God’s kingdom, we see that **Divine power is vulnerable and dependent – when you welcome a child you welcome God who also** entered this world as a powerless child.

I have learned a lot from companioning children as they seek God. I see them reach out in community in ways that we could all be students of: a kindergartener grabbing a new visitor’s hand and bringing her into Sunday school together, a 5th grader asked her SS class if they could write cards for the Kaisers today. I see them seek God, trust in faith and wrestle with how to serve and give even when their resources are limited. If we could spend some time and learn with our youngest Christ followers we just might get a glimpse of the **Divine imagination** for us all. We just might develop ears to hear.

We are not so different from the disciples who responded out of anxiety and missed opportunities. True greatness, for Christ the Messiah, is a downward journey of embracing the ones without status or power to influence. It is Christ’s radical grace, it is his life of serving the unnoticed and his forgiveness of sins that led him to the cross. This same forgiveness is offered to us as it was to the disciples, even when distractions keep us from true discipleship. **And this is the forgiveness that we share with one another in humble service when our narrow sightedness and deafness hinder our relationships.**

So, May God open our eyes so that we may see and our ears so that we may hear” and receive the grace to walk in humility,

to welcome the vulnerable,

to let go of our noisy distractions,

to be fully present to God,

to serve one another seeking harmony.

Amen.

**Sources:**

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