

Mark 9:30-37 Bill Uetrict 18 Pentecost 9.1.24

To quote one of the great philosophers of the last century, New York Yankees catcher and coach, Yogi Berra: “Doesn’t it feel like déjà vu all over again?” To paraphrase Ronald Reagan from his debate with Jimmy Carter: “There he goes again.”

There Jesus goes again. It feels like déjà vu all over again. Didn’t he already say, “The Son of a human being is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again?” Well, yes, he did say that already. This is the second prediction of his passion in the Gospel of Mark. And guess what? There is going to be a third prediction. He’s going to say the same thing again.

Well, what’s the deal? Is Jesus experiencing a little cognitive decline, forgetting what he said before? My wife will often say to me, “You told me that already.” Jesus, you told us that already. Why the repetition?

I remember when our kids were younger, and I often resorted to the one-two-three count. “This is the third [and final] time. You better get upstairs.” The first time didn’t sink in. The second time didn’t sink in. It was necessary to say it three times. Jesus had to repeat himself because the news didn’t sink in. Honestly, the news was so horrific that the disciples couldn’t get it. It was so contrary to what they wanted to hear, contrary to what their expectations were. The words couldn’t existentially sink in. The first time Jesus predicts his passion, Peter says, “God forbid; this can’t be.” Today when he predicts his passion, we are told that “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Now honestly, Jesus is quite straight forward. He’s going to die. What is not to understand about that? Well, there is a big difference between intellectual understanding and the kind of understanding that is a matter of the truth sinking into the depths of your being. And what

often prevents you from truly getting it with all that you are is fear. Fear often stops us from facing reality. Fear often takes us down the road of denial. And denial is not just a river in Egypt; it is often how we cope with what we don't want to face. I suspect that the disciples of Jesus don't want to face reality. And I don't blame them. There's much about life that I would rather not face. If I were one of Jesus' disciples, I wouldn't want to talk about his death either. We just got this thing going, and now we are talking about it ending.

Today's text reveals how much Jesus' disciples don't understand about Jesus and his movement, about how much they live in denial. When they all come to the big city of Capernaum and are in a house, probably Jesus' house, Jesus asks them: "What were you arguing about *on the way*?" *The way* is what Jesus' movement was called. "As you are involved in this discipleship journey, what are you talking about?"

At least give the disciples credit. They answer honestly. "Ourselves." We were talking about who is the greatest? We were talking about who has earned more points. We were arguing about who has risen to the top. We were discussing who has gotten the best grades. We were ruminating on who has the most toys, the most money, the best investments. We were reflecting on who is the best looking, who has the highest poll and crowd numbers, or who truly is the most popular.

When you don't get Jesus and what he is about, when you live your lives in denial this is where you hang out. Life becomes about jockeying for position, putting others down so that you can feel better about yourself. When you don't get Jesus, when you live in denial, life is all about you. When we face the truth—you are going to die; I am going to die—we can't live pretending that life is fundamentally about us. Do you think people living in Hospice are busy checking their score cards, busy counting their money, busy being grateful that at least they

are not like other people, busy trying to figure out who is the greatest? If they are, they are steeped in denial, living and dying in light of a lie. And I know that lying seems increasingly acceptable these days, but lying does not bring us what we want. Hospice patients and all of us live and die more peacefully when we face the truth.

To help his inner circle—the *twelve*—Jesus today does a little show and tell. So, you were arguing about who was the greatest, huh, and right after I had told you for the second time that I am going to die, that the son of human beings is going to be killed by human beings? Well, let me show you who is the greatest. Let me reveal to you who in my world, in the reign of God, matters most.

Jesus then takes a little child in his arms and presents him or her before his disciples. You folks who are jockeying for position, thinking you matter most, believing you have the highest number of points on the scorecard, well, see this. This child is the greatest. And those who welcome a child like this welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes God himself.

Now we all might get a little tingly at this point because some of us live with romantic notions about children. They are so cute. They are so innocent, something that many people believe until they have children! But this is not Jesus' view. Children in Jesus' day were the most vulnerable people around. Many children didn't make it through childbirth. Many didn't live through childhood. All children in Jesus' day had no legal standing. They along with their mothers were remarkably vulnerable.

If you want to participate in the way that is Jesus' way, if you don't want to live in denial, pay attention to the vulnerable. To follow the one who is traveling through Galilee and Capernaum and is heading toward Jerusalem, where he will be crucified, is to redefine life not in terms of power or control. It is to redefine life not through argumentation about

who is the greatest, who works the hardest, who accomplishes the most, who's got the most trophies, who is in the highest leadership position.

Oh, this is not to say that there isn't the need for leaders, for folks who are in charge. There is. But listen to Jesus: If you want to be charge, if you want to lead, if you want to be first, "you must be last of all and servant of all." Leadership matters, but leadership that is the kind that you will find *on the way* with Jesus is leadership that is willing to do the dirty stuff, that is not busy ranking people, that highlights and lifts up the most vulnerable among us.

I must admit to you that for this pastor, lifting up the most vulnerable among us is integral to our faith, especially important, which is why I am especially grateful for organizations like Mission for Area People, the Hope Project, Love Inc., Samaritas, formerly Lutheran Social Services, who help us in our work with vulnerable people. We can do so much more when we do it together.

Caring for the vulnerable is at the center of our mission. Now, I don't want to make this about me, but nothing angers me more than when vulnerable people are mistreated, when they are easily dismissed, even in the church. The church, people who follow the way of Jesus, are especially concerned for the poor, the homeless, the disabled, those with intellectual challenges, the widowed, the abused, the orphaned, the stranger, the immigrant, Haitian refugees, the children being murdered in Gaza, those with dementia, those in Hospice beds, the victims of crimes, those imprisoned. To mistreat them is to mistreat Jesus. To argue about who is the greatest when confronted with them (I sure worked harder than any of them; I who made it to where I am didn't get any help) is to miss the point. Life isn't about who is the best, who is the greatest.

Life is about a self-giving God, a God who is met in one whose love is so large, so self-less, so preoccupied with the vulnerable that he will go the way of the cross, that he will endure the greatest suffering, that he will take on himself the rejection of human beings.

While on the way with this kind of God, why would we want to be arguing about who is the greatest; why would we want to be talking just about ourselves; why would we mistreat the vulnerable?

I know it's hard to understand the way of Jesus. I know it's counter to what the culture teaches us. But the way of Jesus, the way of dying, is the way of God. And according to Jesus, it is not just the way of death, but ultimately it is the way of life. And Jesus said to them: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, *he will rise again*. To be on the way with Jesus ultimately is to be taken into life, new life, resurrected life, life that is much more fascinating than a boring argument about who is the greatest.