



"Faith Seeking Understanding"

a sermon by

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Our text this week comes to us from Mark 9:30-37. Another snapshot of Jesus' life and ministry with the disciples, taking place shortly after the transfiguration.

“They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying 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.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another (about) who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

When you read the scriptures you can do so with any numbers of lenses on- we call this hermeneutics. It is the lenses through which you read the Bible and we all wear a pair whether we intend to or not. Perhaps you read through the lens of your gender or life experience, some read with a lens that looks for elements of liberation, others read with a hermeneutic of suspicion or skepticism. Some read through the lens of poverty, others affluence, others addiction, some read with an eye toward mission, others contemplation and so forth. Of course, the lenses you wear inform the way that you read and understand the text. And all any of us can commit to, really, is developing an awareness of what lenses we are wearing so that we can be as honest as we can about the way our biases, interests, and experiences inform what we are reading, so that we can be more open to the way that God might be inviting us to grow by challenging or reinforcing those lenses. So, that's one thing to be aware of as we think about how we read Biblical texts. Another thing to be aware of is that the text invites us to read for content as well as process. The question being not only what is being said in the scripture itself, but also how it is being said. What is happening around the content- what action is taking place, what narrative clues are we given by the author to tell us about the activity around the speaking- all of this is process that informs the content and sometimes the process has a story to tell of it's own quite apart from what is being said.

This text is a great example. The content lends itself to any number of sermons. Jesus is offering his second prophesy about how he is to be betrayed, killed, and after three days rise again. The disciples have a squabble- each flexing their ego strength debating who among them is the greatest. A little child is brought into the picture as the focus of an object lesson- one we all know quite well: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and not only me but the one who sent me.” Lots of good preaching fodder here, and all important lessons to explore in and of their own right to be sure.

But what interests me most about this text is not just all of this juicy content. It's the process of the story. The movements themselves have a story to tell and thanks to our gifted gospel writer, the tone is set to explore the subtext of the scripture. If this were a stage play, Mark would be the screenwriter giving insight into the motions and inner thoughts of the actors that then shape the way they speak and how they act, ultimately influencing the audience's understanding as a whole.

So let's look at the basic process comments starting from the beginning- the bare bones narrative without the dialogue. "They went on from where they were and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples." "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them," "But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve and said to them," "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms he said to them," The end.

Do you notice a trend in the process? Anything stand out? Three times Jesus initiates conversation with the disciples. And three times the disciples shut it down. The first process comment from Mark tells us that Jesus, though he was going through his own hometown and was quite popular by this time, incidentally, did not want anyone else to know because he had something that he wanted to teach his disciples. It's not that he just wanted to pull off the road and slip into a corner booth in some quiet diner because he had something private to tell them. It's that he was teaching along the journey. He was trying to have a conversation that would shape their life together. There were things he wanted them to understand so that they could be changed. Important things like the fact that he was going to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. Jesus wanted time with them to teach, which entails not just a one way flow of information, it necessitates an exchange for there to be real learning. And how do they respond? "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." Their friend. Their mentor. Their teacher. Their Messiah. 'But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask.' Conversation over. Actually, it had never even begun, really. Presumably Jesus walks on in silence because in the next breath they are in Capernaum.

So they arrive at their destination- and this time it is Jesus who makes the observation about the activity among them and again initiates the conversation, "What were you arguing about on the way?" And again they shut it down, "But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest." Then Jesus initiates again, and the passage ends with Jesus' final, pretty loaded statement, 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' And in the next sentence finally a disciple speaks, but he totally changes the subject. The teaching moment is passed. There is no sign that any understanding has been reached at all.

This does not shed a favorable light on the disciples. They have questions but they do not ask. They get called out but instead of facing the music they keep silent. And the impact of the object lesson seems to just float off into space. They would rather keep their questions than pursue true understanding. And keep their pride intact rather than risk being challenged to grow.

Somewhere along the line we picked up the notion that it was a sin to ask a question when you didn't know the answer. And as people who are products of the enlightenment- an age of inquiry- you would think that we ourselves would be better than the rather dubious disciples at this but we're not. An article in the Wall Street Journal¹ this weekend highlighted the dilemma created by Sir Isaac Newton who, in the 17th century, claimed that his "cosmic system proved

¹ http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB10001424052970203440104574405030643556324-1MyQjAxMDA5MDEwNDExNDQyWj.html

beyond doubt the existence of an intelligent, omniscient and omnipotent creator, who was obviously (Newton said) ‘very well skilled in Mechanics and Geometry.’ Enthralled by the prospect of such cast-iron certainty, (the Journal reports) churchmen started to develop a scientifically-based theology that eventually made Newton’s (theory) essential to Western Christianity.” The downfall being then, that we developed the idea that if something about our faith is not scientifically verifiable, then it cannot be true, or if something about our faith could be explained by other scientific theories then it edged out the activity and necessity of God. Thus, we developed an aversion to questions. For if the answer cannot be proven, or can be proved by other means, we have come to believe, then what does that say about our faith? So, like the disciples, we don’t ask because we are afraid.

A well meaning acquaintance once gave me a book of questions and answers about God. I opened it up to the middle on a whim and the first question that my eyes landed on was, ‘Is it ever ok to question God?’ And the answer, in big, capital letters read, “NO!” “Questioning God shows a lack of faith in God’s plan. If you have enough faith you will have all the answers that you need and if you don’t understand, pray for more faith.” The same thing happened with the next page. Question: ‘Is it ever ok to be angry with God?’ Answer (big capital letters) “NO!” Another sermon for another time. We’ll take that one on in Lent. So being a good Presbyterian I have a natural aversion to things that make questions suspect because Presbyterians love learning, and how can their be true learning without authentic questions? But by and large as humans we prefer statements to questions. We’re good at making statements, but not so good at asking questions. Statements are safe. Questions are risky. Statements show power. Questions show vulnerability. Statements imply confidence. Questions imply uncertainty. Couple this with our fear of losing God in the process of asking questions, and the spirit of inquiry for the people of faith is all but doomed.

But look where the failure to ask the question leads the disciples and Jesus. It is like a snowball effect. A lack of faith in the one receiving the question (it says they were afraid) leads to no opportunity for their own understanding, leads to an obstacle to intimacy with one another and Christ because had they asked a word of clarification about why the Messiah of all people had to suffer, they wouldn’t have had such a lame conversation about who was the greatest to begin with because as we know the definition of greatness in Jesus’ world is to be made lowly. Not that they would have known this. They didn’t ask. The opportunity to learn and grow in discipleship was lost. And later instead of coming clean when they were called out, they stare at their feet and remain silent when Jesus asks, opting to protect their pride rather than engage. And Jesus, instead of having a dialogue that could have held great potential for mutual enrichment, has a soliloquy. He gets to sit and listen to himself speak neither for the first time nor the last, only Jesus probably wasn’t the kind of guy who would enjoy this as much as most of us do. Jesus isn’t in this to make statements and give information, he’s in this for transformation, and that is only going to happen when there is an authentic exchange that invites him in. When he can be challenged by the disciples’ questions and they can receive what he has to say, and both leave fulfilled and changed.

We so often believe that if we have questions of God or about God or faith or life that that somehow reveals a lack of faith. When’s the last time you had such a question but didn’t raise your hand for fear of sounding stupid, or seeing the raised eyebrows of your pastor, or out of concern for being wrong? But shutting down the conversation is not what we’re about as Christian peo-

ple. We're about having an authentic exchange with the Lord, that's why he came to talk and live in person- God would be content to have a one-way conversation, from the top down, no more. So he meets us eye to eye. Draws us out and challenges us to invite him in. Into the ultimate teaching moment that would leave both parties changed forever. One that was only spirit became captive to the flesh for a time. And the other that was held captive to the flesh was given freedom in the spirit for eternity.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Jesus draws a little child into the picture. There is rich content in the lesson he gives, but there is a lesson in the process as well. I was reminded of one of the many great contributions of children to the world several months ago when I pulled into the parking lot at the same time as my colleague Wes Barry as he and his 2-year old daughter Ellie got out of their car. She was off to school. Decked out in an outfit of purple tights and a matching floral top that she had picked out for herself that day, as we walked to the church you could see the world coming alive through her eyes, and she was brimming with observations and questions. She looked at the world through the lens of inquiry. "What's that?" She chirped, pointing. "Why?" "What's that?" That's a truck. "Why?" It's bringing us mail. "What's that?" That's a tree. "Why?" Because God planted it there. "What's that?" That's a crane. "Why?" Because they have to reach the top of that big tall building. And so on until her dad gently reminded her that it was time to go to school, and me that it was time to go to work.

We ask questions not out of a lack of faith, but as a sign of faith. Because when we do so while seated in the lap of our heavenly parent as we all are, then we come as children who are not threatened by their uncertainty, but who are open to being taught. Who are asking to see the world through the eyes of the one that they love and trust more than anything in the universe, and are willing to be shaped and changed by what they hear. Professor Daniel Migliore calls this faith seeking understanding. It is a premise of Christian discipleship that says that faith "seeks understanding and does not pretend that it has arrived at its goal."² We do neither God nor ourselves any favors by keeping silent in the face of uncertainty. For as our divine parent, in his immense love and creativity, God delights in watching the world come alive through our eyes, and wants to engage our observations and questions through faith. Because it is through faith that we will be equipped to seek understanding. And understanding, we may have hope. Amen.

² Migliore, Daniel L. Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids) 2004. xi.