

Who Is the Greatest?  
Mark 9:30-37

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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February 26, 2020 (Ash Wednesday)

Mark 9:30-37

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 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."

In our Scripture passage this evening, Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem. He started in that direction in last Sunday's episode, the Transfiguration. He's not talking with anybody except his disciples, and he's telling them again what's to come. He's telling them that he will be betrayed, and killed, and that he will rise again.

But they don't get it.

Instead of focusing on what Jesus is saying, they argue about which one of THEM is the greatest. Which one of THEM is the greatest disciple of Jesus.

Being a disciple of Jesus ain't about you, Skippy.

Being a disciple of Jesus ... is about Jesus.

When they admit to Jesus what they were talking about, I can just imagine his face. After he facepalms, he tells them whoever wants to be first among the disciples must be last, and the servant of all.

He looks around and finds the most vulnerable human being he can find, the lowest in status and importance in every way. He picks the kid up, plops her in his lap, and tells the disciples that 'Whoever welcomes one [person like this] in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Most of the sins we fall into, both as individuals and as a society, start with the same kind of blindness that the disciples have here.

We don't get it.

We fail to listen to Jesus.

We don't even notice the most powerless and vulnerable, the people whom Jesus told us to welcome and to pay the most attention to.

We make things about us.

What we say and do matters.

What we don't say anything about or do anything about, matters.

The deliberate actions of stealing or killing, are sin.

The more insidious idolatry of gradually letting our worship – our definition of who we are and who and what are most important to us—drift away from God, is sin.

The kind of casual hatred that allows our representatives<sup>1</sup> and our government to be cruel to the powerless in our name, (you know, as long as we don't personally see it), is sin.

Assuming that everyone's fine because we personally don't have a problem and ignoring the vulnerable, are sin.

Well, we're not done yet. We are all sinners, but, if you are alive, God is not done with you yet.

Experts tell us that it's easier to make a change in our lives if it's for a specified time period.

Lent starts tonight. Forty days, plus Sundays.

So, for the next forty days plus the Sundays in between, PAY ATTENTION.

Pay attention to who is in the room, and who isn't.

Pay attention to the people who aren't in the room, and the obstacles that stop them.

Pay attention to the people whom others ignore.

That's the first step toward doing something about it.

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<sup>1</sup> They are not our leaders. They are our representatives. Whatever City Council people, state representatives, Congresscritters, Senators, and the President do in office, they do it in OUR name. If you're comfortable with what your representative is saying and doing, great! Vote for their reelection. If not, then you need to take action to get a better representative.

Paying attention takes energy. It can be exhausting, especially when we are constantly deluged with information.

I'm not saying that this is easy.

It's not – that's part of why we don't do it.

Keep trying.

If you realize you missed something or someone, work to do better the next time.

Keep working to pay attention to the least of these, because the uncomfortable truth of our faith is that how we're treating them is how we're treating Jesus.

Amen.