

Greatness Redefined – September 20, 2015 – Mark 9

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

Several of you in the congregation are or have been educators. As teachers you sometimes engage your students in discussion. In every classroom setting you have the quiet students – the ones who refuse to voluntarily answer any questions out loud unless called upon, even if they know the answers. Perhaps they are shy and have a fear of speaking out in public or they are afraid they might get the answer wrong. Fear of shame in front of others might keep them silent. One of your challenges is helping them to find their voices and speak up.

On the other extreme there are the students who blurt things out, not really caring if they have the right or wrong answer. They simply enjoy the discourse and have no problem jumping into the discussion. As a teacher you strive to keep them from dominating the conversation so others might have their turns. All of us fall somewhere on this continuum, whether we always hold ourselves back or tend to jump right into the discourse, or on any place in between.

A well-known passage from the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes states, “there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak” (Eccl. 3:7). There is a powerful lesson in this verse. There are numerous occasions when it is appropriate for us to speak up and speak out. We can share our opinions and weigh in on important issues in the world around us – it is through this sharing of ideas that we learn from one another. We speak in personal and social conversations in order to develop and strengthen relationships with others. It is through speech that we learn about one another. We can also share words of empathy, encouragement, or compassion to someone in need of our support. It is through our words that we care for one another.

And if there are times we should speak up, there are other times when we should remain silent. Sometimes we don’t know enough about a particular issue to offer any meaningful input, and our silence is an opportunity to learn. Also, we probably shouldn’t speak out in anger if what we say might be destructive – remember that old stand-by “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” You don’t have to worry about retracting harsh words later if you keep them from being said in the first place.

Sometimes words escape us when we are faced with something we can’t explain, and trying to put it into words would just get in the way. In the face of the great mysteries, silence is often an appropriate response. Finally, in the face of harsh realities or times of grief, our physical presence with those afflicted means much more than the shallow words that might come from our lips.

But then there are those occasions when it is difficult to know whether it is time to speak up or shut up. Sometimes we talk too much. We feel so strongly about a particular subject that we tend to dominate the conversation, and we close off from what others might have to say. We miss out on the perspectives of those who are different than us. Other times, we remain silent when we should be speaking out on behalf of others. We might witness injustice or unkindness

toward another, but in fear of making a scene, we remain silent. (Illustration idea from Feasting on the Word, p. 92, Harry B. Adams)

In our passage from Mark's gospel there are two places where the disciples remain silent in response to something that Jesus said. In the first instance, Jesus had been talking about what was going to happen to him. He spoke directly to his disciples, not out in the open crowds, but to them only and told them that he was going to be betrayed and killed and then three days later, would rise again. The text tells us, they didn't understand what he was saying and they were afraid to ask questions.

They were silent. They were afraid to ask. Now, I find it hard to believe that they were afraid of Jesus himself. Afraid to ask him a question. I think instead they were afraid to talk about this particular subject. This topic of conversation was troubling. Jesus was talking about betrayal and death. And furthermore, something even more astounding, he said he would not remain dead. That was a little too much for them to grasp. If this were true, then there was definitely more to Jesus than what met the eye. And they didn't want to dig any deeper. They were afraid of what he might tell them, afraid to know the full truth. And so, instead of asking questions in order to understand, it was easier to just remain quiet and not know all the details.

I am sure most of you have heard the phrase, ignorance is bliss. Sometimes we face something in life that is troubling to us. We may learn a dark secret about someone we love. We may learn that something is going on in our very midst that is unerving. Or we find out that we have a serious medical condition, yet we prefer not to know all the details. At times we face hard truths in our lives that cause us to take stock and re-examine who we are and what we are doing. And sometimes, in those moments, ignorance is bliss.

This goes to wider, worldly issues also. We hear stories of gross injustice. We learn of millions of people facing starvation across the world. We learn of the violent sufferings of so many. We hear of the exploitations of the powerful over the weak. Take for example the situations in Syria or in Columbia. Or closer to home, the issues of ongoing racism and white privilege. Often we would rather not know all the details, because by knowing the details, we have to take responsibility for that knowing. We have to act, or make the decision not to act. It's easier to just not know all the details. By avoiding the full truth, by avoiding asking the questions, life remains safe. It is safer to live in the shadow of truth, less painful. Safer, but not responsible.

The disciples didn't want to know about what was going to happen to Jesus. It was too much for their minds to grasp, to comprehend. They wanted him to just be their teacher, their rabbi. Why did he have to talk about betrayal and death and resurrection? And so they avoided those questions when the subject came up. Instead of asking, they chose to remain silent.

We too can choose to ask or not ask those questions. What does it mean that Jesus died and was raised? Does that mean something, does it tell us something about his identity? When we

ignore the questions about his death and resurrection, if instead we treat him as simply a great moral teacher, as some do, then we can rest in the safety net of ignorance. "Jesus was a good and kind man who taught us lots of great moral lessons," and we can pick and choose what to follow and what not to follow.

If instead we seek to discover the answers to these questions - why did Jesus die? How was he raised from the dead? What does that mean for us? When we seek to discover his identity, learning that he was truly the Christ, the Messiah, God Incarnate, God with us, then all of a sudden what he has taught us is much more than simple moral lessons. We have to then decide to accept or reject – not his lessons - but him. And if we accept him, that holds us responsible to follow him. What does it look like to follow him? The passage gives us an important clue.

In our passage from Mark, the disciples were silent a second time. On the journey to Capernaum they were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest of them all. Boasting to one another. Maybe half kidding, but maybe also, half serious. When they arrived at their destination, Jesus turned to them and asked, "What were you arguing about?" And they were silent.

Did they realize how petty and shallow their discussion had been? Obviously they knew that they had messed up. They knew that jockeying for position behind Jesus was probably not a smart thing to do, otherwise someone would have spoken up when he asked the question. Like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar right before dinner, the disciples were caught in their shame, and they were afraid to admit it. Jesus knew. Did Jesus overhear their conversation, or did he simply understand human nature?

How often do we maneuver for position in this world? Do we seek to promote our status? Do we search for ways to make ourselves look better in front of others? Do we put others down, even subtly, to increase our sense of worth? If Jesus were to listen to our private thoughts, or overhear some of our conversations, would we too turn red with shame?

Jesus saw through them. Saw past their human frailties. He said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Obviously this statement turns the human understanding of greatness upside down. Someone with power and prestige supposedly never has to get his or hands dirty. That person has people, hirelings to take care of the details, the daily chores.

When Jesus spoke of the one who is last and servant of all, he is referring to the lowliest servant. The one who eats last, after everyone else, including all the other servants, has eaten their fill. The Greek word is diakonos – this same word would later be used to refer to a special role within the early church – diakonos or deacon. A deacon is one who serves, one who cares for the neediest people, putting their needs before his or her own.

But Jesus uses this word to refer to all who would be great. Because for Jesus, greatness is never about power and prestige. It isn't about who has the most money, the highest status, or who gets to sit in the best seat in the house. Greatness is about doing the grunt work. Leadership is about taking care of the needs of others first.

Jesus gave them an example. He took a small child in his arms. In that time, children had absolutely no status, no worth. In that regard, they were similar to servants. They were non-persons. They were mere possessions, owned by their father, and children relied completely on others for protection and care. Jesus told his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

If we are to follow Jesus, if we are to be great in his kingdom, then we are to care for the lowliest of the low. But think about what Jesus is saying here. He is assigning worth to those who by worldly standards have no worth. If you welcome one such as this, then you are in essence welcoming God. Now the world doesn't see it that way. You're not going to win any status points by caring for those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In fact some may wonder why you even bother. But according to Jesus, that is what true greatness looks like. Putting a so-called non-person above yourself.

Now notice the disciples didn't say anything here either. This was and is a hard teaching. One they obviously did not take to heart, because in the very next chapter, the disciples rebuked people for bringing children to Jesus for his touch and blessing. They completely missed the lesson and continued in their preferred way of living and acting.

And so with us. To follow Jesus, to be great in his kingdom, requires a transformation of both thinking and acting. Remember when I said before, we are sometimes faced with hard truths that we would rather not hear. We remain silent, we do nothing, we continue on living the status quo. Maybe if we ignore it, refuse to acknowledge it, maybe it will go away. This passage in Mark reveals a hard truth. But if we truly wish to follow Jesus, a change of thinking and of acting is in order. We can begin our journey toward greatness by serving one person at a time.