

# **The End & Back Again: to the beginning**

## Returning to the Journey with Jesus in Mark's Gospel: Part 4

### **Week 1. READ: Mark 8:1-38**

#### **Show Time**

#### **Feeding of the Four Thousand 8:1-10**

Welcome to the heart of the gospel found in chapter 8. Mark uses reoccurring stories to tie his gospel together. This pattern is used by Mark in knitting together the stories of John the baptizer (1:2-9, 14 & 6:14-29); selection and sending of the twelve disciples (3:13-19a & 6:7-13, 30); feeding the crowds (5000 fed 6:34-44 & 4000 fed 8:1-10); healing of the blind man (in Bethsaida 8:22-26 & in Jericho 10:46-52) and Jesus predicting his suffering and death (1<sup>st</sup> time: 8:31-33; 2<sup>nd</sup> time: 9:30-32; & 3<sup>rd</sup> time: 10:32-34). This pattern foreshadows and connects the story for the listening audience. The clues build anticipation, interest and makes for an ease of following the framework of the gospel and the individual stories by the congregation.

What makes it easier to recall what you heard? “The culture in which he (Jesus) lived was given mainly to oral transmission, that is, to conveying information by word of mouth. Accordingly, historians think it more likely that people would have remembered short sayings, such as proverbs (‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown,’ Mark 6:4)...Because stories are intrinsically memorable, parables tend to score high by this criterion also. Other factors that make material memorable include the use of humor, exaggeration, or paradox,” (Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, Louisville:

Westminster John Knox Press, 2013 (Second Edition), p. 60).

Stories that are out of the norm grab our attention as well. One such story is feeding a large crowd of people with just a few fish and bread. Who among us has not had company stop by near dinner time when you only had a small amount of left overs ready to eat? This always seems to happen when the refrigerator is empty and a trip to the grocery store for the week was on your list to do right after dinner. 4000 drop-in dinner guests would be memorable!

The story of the feeding of the 4000 has many similarities to the feeding of the 5000 (6:30-44): large crowd of hungry people in a remote place, the disciples, Jesus, and a small supply of fish and bread. What is unique to the story of the 4000 who were fed is that it lacks connection to what has gone on prior saying: “In those days” (the other places where this phrase is used in Mark is the story of the baptism of Jesus (1:9) and in the apocalyptic (end time) teachings in chapter 13 (vv. 17, 19 & 24). Whereas Jesus is described in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person as having compassion on the crowd in Mark 6, he tells the disciples of his compassion for crowd 8:2. Additionally, while the crowd had a one day hunger after listening to Jesus teach all day in Mark 6, the crowd had a three day hunger in 8:2 (it is also interesting to note that nowhere does it tell us what Jesus did or taught during these three days).

The feeding of the 4000 story can be pressed to possess communion style roots because Jesus blessed the fish, gives thanks (the Greek word for gave thanks is *eucharist*, another word used for communion) for the bread (compare with 1 Corinthians 11:23-24). Everyone who was hungry was fed abundantly to the point of significant leftovers. Matthew’s account of the story adds that it was

4000 men plus women and children who ate (15:38). From the very oldest to the very youngest, all who were hungry were fed. This is an expression of God's hospitality.

When I was confirmed, I received my First Communion. It was thought that was the point of knowing enough about communion to be properly prepared to receive the sacrament. Later, the age for communion was dropped to fifth grade, then to second grade. In the Western Catholic Church, the emphasis has been upon knowledge and preparation to eat and drink. On the other side, the Eastern Orthodox Church has always served communion to infants immediately after baptism. The emphasis has been upon the gift of God for all the baptized, men, women and children.

Jesus did not turn anyone who was hungry away from the table. Even though Judas knew in his heart that he would betray Jesus before the Last Supper (John 13:2), and Jesus knew who would betray him (John 13:21, 26-27), he still dipped the bread and served Judas. The forgiveness and love of God is the gift that God gives us in this meal. Who among us understands how the bread we eat and the wine we drink is at the same time the body and blood of Christ? Martin Luther called it a mystery. Should we not practice the same hospitality at the Lord's table welcoming all people to eat and drink in the same way that we do at our own tables at home? This meal is the amazing grace of God for all who are hurting and hungry and looking for the love and hope that only God can give.

If we baptize children who do not "know" what baptism means and believe that God is the source of action in this sacrament, is it not also true that it is God who is acting in the meal? This is the nature of these sacraments. God acts and we receive. All are welcome.

## **Conflict with the Religious Leaders 8:11-13**

The religious leaders showed up to conflict with Jesus and demanded a sign from him. Either Jesus responds by granting them a sign or refuses their demand. When a physical sign is required to visually demonstrate the validity of faith, then it is no longer faith. When we see a miracle be it small or large, it is a blessing. However, Scripture reminds us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” (Hebrews 11:1). For we are to “walk by faith and not by sight,” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Our Christian faith is built upon the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as revealed in Scripture. The story of Jesus life is the sign of God’s love and mercy for us as we grab hold of this narrative by faith.

There is a major difference between experiencing a sign from God verses demanding or seeking a sign. Faith recognizes that God is with us in hard as well as good times. Faith emerges from a relationship of trust that is at work within us. As we worship, study Scripture and pray our faith muscle is exercised and grows stronger. Faith that demands or needs a sign is testing God. This need to test God did not go well for the Jews in the Wilderness (see Exodus 17:2; also Deuteronomy 32:20). While we can “see” God at work in the world, our neighborhood or our life with the eyes of faith, we cannot “prove” this is the work of the Holy Spirit. No, it is as we step out and follow the nudge of the Spirit, we often receive confirmation by the blessing of the experience.

The “sighed deeply in his spirit (v.12)” coupled together with “he (Jesus) looked up to heaven and sighed (7:34)” are the actions of a healer or miracle worker. “...Jesus’ deep sighing or groaning in v. 12 would signify to the ancient audience the typical deep inhalation of the

wonder-worker or prophet performing a mighty deed or making an authoritative utterance. The sound produced would have been taken as an indication of possession by a spirit,” (Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark, A Commentary*, Hermeneia Series, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 384). In the story of the healing of the man who was hearing and speech impaired, Jesus sighed in prayer and healed him. Meanwhile, in the Mark 8 story when the religious leaders demanded a sign from Jesus, he sighed in frustration. Who were the people truly deaf and blind to what Jesus was sent to do?

### **Blindness of the Disciples 8:14-21**

The Holy Spirit and yeast are two sources of action. The Holy Spirit calls, invites and beckons us to faith in Jesus Christ. The same Spirit guides and directs us to other Christians, a community of faith (church) in which we are formed into a community to worship God, encourage faith and action in the name of the Lord. The Holy Spirit also forms and shapes us into the image of Christ.

The ancient baker’s element of yeast is used in Scripture for examples of both good and evil. Matthew and Luke picked up the parable of yeast as a symbol of the ever expanding nature of the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Yeast is used as a negative example of how evil can grow in our heart (see Galatians 5:7-12; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Similarly, yeast makes septic tanks work well, but pee-yew!

Jesus refers to the ideas and agenda of both the Pharisees and King Herod as yeast that can grow counter to the message and purpose God had sent Jesus to accomplish. Beware of all of the messages and purposes that draw us away from Christ and his will. This could include money, success and even patriotism – putting the United States or

even a political parties' agenda ahead of God's agenda. When we care more about our self or our country than God, other people and creation, we may be ingesting the yeast of the world. Beware!

Jesus calls his disciples out for their blindness to his purposes (8:17-21). 8:17 has parallels to what Jesus said in 7:18. Do you still lack understanding? This is the closing word again in 8:21 and 6:52. Jesus came to plant the kingdom of God in the hearts of people. He opposed power and people who abused power. In fact, he came to lift up the low and forgotten ones. He put children in his lap so he could listen to and bless them. Jesus came to empower the powerless so they could be set free and live in the gift of life God intended. A sign of his open resistance to power was his healing on the Sabbath when he saw a person in need (3:1-6). Jesus broke rules for the sake of the kingdom.

### **Healing of a Blind Man 8:22-26**

While the location of the feeding of the 4000 is absent from the story, Jesus and his disciples now come a second time to Bethsaida, which John's Gospel identifies as the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Philip. It is located on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, only a couple of miles to the northeast of Capernaum. This is the first and only time we have what could be called a healing by degree. It is gradual healing that requires Jesus to pray for the blind man several times until his vision is clear. Because the man was able to identify the appearance of people like walking trees, he must have been a sighted person prior who lost his ability to see. This is a private healing like the deaf man in the Decapolis (7:31-35) as Jesus leads him out of public view out of the city (8:23). He uses natural elements to anoint (saliva) and lays hands on his eyes and prays.

Like the deaf man in the Decapolis, Jesus tells him to tell no one about this healing. In fact, he is not to reenter the city. Instead, go home. This is the first of two eye healing stories, one at the front end and one at the back end, of the three times that he announces his upcoming death and resurrection. Placing these stories where they are set in this narrative says: Open your eyes and notice the message – Jesus is going to die and rise again! This is his greatest work. This is God’s given purpose for Jesus to fulfill for the sake of the world.

### **Peter Confesses Jesus as Messiah 8:27-30**

At the center point of the gospel of Mark is Peter’s confession of faith. The question Jesus asks sets it all in motion: Who do people say I am (8:27)? Some people identified Jesus with John the Baptist, others the great Old Testament prophet Elijah and still others named Jesus as another prophet. It was Peter who spoke up and identified Jesus as the long awaited Messiah.

Now a word about Caesarea Philippi, located twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee in a primarily gentile area near Mount Herman. Why does Mark place this story of revelation in this city built by Tetrarch Philip in 2-1 BCE, son of Herod the Great, and built to honor Caesar Augustus? One reason may be that “...in the Greco-Roman period the god of Mount Herman (Baal identified with Zeus) was considered to be an oracular deity. Peter’s unexplained insight that Jesus is the messiah and Jesus’ revelation of the necessity that the Son of Man must suffer take on the connotations of oracular utterances for those familiar with the oracular character of the region,” (Collins, p. 400).

While it is not surprising that the Holy Spirit spoke and worked through Jesus, Peter and the disciples on the other hand have proven to be hard hearted and lacking understanding (6:52, 7:18, 8:17-18, 21). Perhaps the redeeming quality of the bumbling and ignorant disciples is that despite all of that, the story of Jesus as told by his followers still changed lives and created Christian community from village to village. Who are we to doubt that God can use us despite our shortcomings?

### **Jesus Predicts his Death (1<sup>st</sup> time) 8:31-33**

Immediately on the heels of Peter's confession of faith, Jesus says that he will suffer greatly, experience rejections at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed and rise again in three days. Right in the middle of the drama, the first clue is given on what is going to happen to the hero of the story. The conflict has been building throughout the story between Jesus and the religious community so it does not come as a complete surprise. What is new is what is going to happen as a result of this ongoing conflict between temple leadership and Jesus.

It is true that Jesus did not waste any breath on praising the existing religious leadership. Quite to the contrary, Jesus challenged existing religious rules consistently with no apology. In fact, he justified what he thought and dared the leaders to defy him.

Driven by his God-given purpose to extend the kingdom of God to all people, Jesus works hard to reach out to the women, children, the sick and possessed. He lifts up suffering people and challenges the system. In many respects, Jesus is revolutionary. The religious leaders (elders, chief priests, and the scribes) are the establishment.



Now just a few verses after Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, he now rebukes Jesus for saying he is going soon be killed. Jesus addresses Peter and says: “Get behind me Satan,” (v. 33). Peter was speaking out of his love for Jesus and not in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter was listening to his natural care for Jesus, not wanting his teacher and friend to suffer and die instead of listening to the words of truth his teacher was speaking.

### **The Cost of Following 8:34-9:1**

It is noteworthy that Jesus “called the crowd” (v.34) to join his disciples as he began to teach about what it means to be his follower. To any who wish, want, or have the will to be a follower of Jesus, we must deny ourselves as the ultimate in our life, to let nothing hold us back in fully following him, and/or we are to let go, and let God. The cross which will later be the instrument on which Jesus will die, may in fact be our future too. Throughout history, many Christians have died for their faith. This is the potential cost and risk of the Christian faith.

You cannot wade into the faith and experience the fullness of the new life – where the old life is gone and all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). “For whoever wants to save his (physical) life will lose (eternal life); but whoever loses his (physical) life because of me will save it (that is, will save his soul or gain eternal life),” (Collins, p. 409). This is a call to be all in or go home. As we die to ourselves, we rise to new life in Christ Jesus.

### **Soul Sower**

The vision statement for Grace Church in Loves Park is “By the power of the Holy Spirit, we will form dynamic disciples of Jesus Christ.” Bob Logan is a Christian who

trains Christian leaders in coaching skills, is part of the house church movement and co-authored and published a book on discipleship entitled: *The Discipleship Difference: Making Disciples While Growing as Disciples*, Logan Leadership, 2015. Together with Chuck Ridley, they identify eight dimensions of a disciple, one of which is “spiritual responsiveness.” What they describe is that a Christian disciple “actively listens to the Holy Spirit and takes action according to what you are hearing.” As a result of attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, a follower of Jesus responds.

Donna responds to the promptings of the Spirit. The love of the Lord is evident in her life. She is firm in her convictions. For those who know her best, Donna is an encouragement to trust and follow the Lord. Her strong faith inspires faith in others.

When Jesus was rebuked by Peter about his impending death, Jesus confronted him that he was “setting his mind” on the things of humans and not on God (8:33). The Apostle Paul taught that if we want to hear the voice of the Spirit, we must set our “set our mind” on the Spirit (Romans 8:5). Paul describes an openness and eager anticipation to be responsive to the Holy Spirit. This is the way of God. God communicates with us through the Spirit. We cannot know nor hear the Spirit’s voice unless we pay attention and respond. This is what Paul means when he says we are to “set our minds” on the Spirit.

The movement of the Spirit has directed Donna to seek training to be a volunteer chaplain at a local hospital. Through her responsiveness, she has been an encouragement, a woman of prayer, offered comfort and prayed for healing. Donna has been a source for God to work in special ways she will never know and a bold witness for Jesus.

In her wintering in Florida, Donna has used her chaplaincy training to be an encouragement and witness to people behind bars. Each of these experiences has stretched Donna and shown her how God works in amazing ways when we say “yes.” Bit by bit, she has learned to know and trust the voice of the Spirit. Her faith has grown by seeing God at work first-hand. Donna knows it is not her, but God who accomplishes great things through her.

The same Holy Spirit wants to work through anyone who is willing to listen and respond. We learn as we listen and do. God wants to accomplish big things in this world. God wants everyone to know the Lord’s love and presence. We plant seeds of faith but God gives the growth. Pay attention. Be willing to step into the calling of God. Let the adventure begin or continue as you “set your mind” on the Spirit!

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What are some of the major points of chapter 8 that speak to you? What is important about this for you at this time of your life?
2. What did you notice that you had not seen before?
3. Is there anything holding you back from being all in with Christ? What are you afraid of? Are you ready to “let go, and let God?” If not, is this something you are hoping to do in the next month?
4. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit still speaks to people in a hunch, an idea, a voice, a new thought? Have you sensed God speaking to you? If not, try paying attention throughout your day and say like Joshua – “Speak Lord, I am listening.” If you have heard God, what did God say and did you act on it?

## **Week 2. READ: Mark 9:2-13**

### **Show Time**

As we move to a new scene in the Jesus narrative, there is an abrupt shift of pace. The introduction to this story adds a new twist saying it is six days later. Bible scholars offer a variety of opinions on the origin of this story most of which include the possibility that it has roots as a resurrection story as seen in his dazzling clothing similar to his appearance in Revelation 1:16. While this is interesting, there is actually no connection between dazzling clothing in the resurrection accounts.

The location of the “high mountain” (9:2) is not identified. Tradition holds that it was Mount Tabor located six miles southeast of Nazareth in Galilee. Tabor is only 1,843 feet in elevation which is equal to the highest point in Wisconsin. Another possibility is Mount Hermon located northeast of Caesarea Philippi, named in Mark 8:27 as the location of the preceding account. A second reason for considering Hermon as the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured is because it is a snow covered mountain with an elevation of 9,100 feet. Psalm 133:3 mentions Mount Hermon in relation to a family that lives together in unity.

Six days later is a unique opening to this story. It may be referring to the sixth day of creation when God created humans. It could also imply that they arrived at the mountain after six days and began to ascend. In this way of thinking, the transfiguration of Jesus may have symbolically happened on the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of rest and worship in the presence of God.

Only the twelve disciples heard the exchange between Jesus and Peter when the Lord was correctly identified as the Messiah, the anointed one of God who has come to redeem the world. Perhaps to highlight the importance of the revelation that took place on the mountain, Jesus took only three disciples with him. Peter, James and John become the inner circle of Jesus followers. Later, they will become leaders in Christ's church. As a smaller group, the secrecy of what takes place on this mountain is easier to maintain (9:9). It is not until v. 14 that any information is given about what the other nine disciples were doing while Jesus and his leadership triad were off doing their thing.

The format of this story has a distant ring to it that echoes back to the days of Moses when he ascended Mount Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments. Similar to that story, a cloud covered them (9:7 and Exodus 24:15-17 or see Exodus 40:34-35). Accounts like these are referred to as a theophany, the appearance of God. While the glory of the Lord was like a burning fire in Exodus 24, Jesus clothes became a brilliant bleached white glow. Its placement here in Mark immediately following Peter's confession of faith and in the midst of the three announcement sayings about the upcoming suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus suggests that this story gives further witness to who Jesus is and what is forthcoming in the story.

Not only does the transfiguration story have characteristics that remind a listener of the Sinai story but Moses and Elijah appear and have an undisclosed conversation with Jesus. For fans of Star Trek, this has a "beam me up Scotty" mystical apparition to it. Here beside Jesus is Moses the great deliverer who God used to set the Jews free from Egyptian slavery. This is the man of God who stood in God's presence and received the Ten

Commandments and other instruction for forty days on Sinai. This is the one chosen and called by God in the burning bush who led the Jews for forty years in the wilderness until it was time to re-enter the Promised Land. While Moses could see the Promised Land, he was forbidden to lead the Jews back home and he died atop Mount Nebo.

Also present with Moses and Jesus was the great Hebrew prophet named Elijah. Like Moses before him, Elijah faced many challenges for God's sake. While Moses negotiated with Pharaoh for the Jews freedom, Elijah had to speak on God's behalf of the powerful and evil King Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel. He prophesied a very unpopular draught in this agricultural economy because so few were following in the way of Yahweh and instead worshipped Baal. He faced a spiritual showdown with the priests of Baal to prove who was the true God. Elijah battled some depression in his life and ran away to hide in a mountain cave where God called to him. Finally, Elijah was taken by God direct into heaven by way of a chariot of fire.

The Jews had a holiday called the Feast of Tabernacles where they traveled to Jerusalem and made tents and sleep in them to recall how God provided for their ancestors in wilderness. Peter, James and John wanted to make tents and stay in them on the mount of Transfiguration because of this overpowering experience. It is reminiscent of Joshua who did not want to leave the presence of the Lord when Moses exited the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33:11).

Despite all of this theophany stuff, the high point of this story is the voice of God who reminds Peter, James and John that this is God's son, listen to him, v, 7. There is a strong parallel to the words God spoke at Jesus' baptism,

(Mark 1: 11). A follower of Jesus is called to listen to his word. How can we listen to him unless we read and ponder the gospels? The outcome sought is not simply listening, but obeying and doing what Jesus calls us to be about.

## **Soul Sower**

When it comes to experiencing the presence of God in worship, or in the study of the Scriptures or in prayer, many of the people who come to mind are leaders: Bible study leaders, pastors or worship leaders. They come to mind first because they are out front and visible. Leaders in prayer oftentimes are more comfortable behind the scenes. One such behind the scenes person is Sheri.

In this woman of God you find a person of integrity who both prays with her heart and yet knows disappointment when hearts still hurt and sick people die. Sheri is humble and would never put her name forward as a champion of prayer. She is never satisfied with her faith in God, the words she uses to express in a prayer for someone or her witness on behalf of Jesus Christ. Yet her heart is always overflowing with love for God and others and looking for an opportunity to bring people who need God's love together to receive prayer. Sheri will do whatever she can to be available when prayer is being offered.

One of the most tangible ways people experience God in Sheri's presence is food. Jesus said that he was the living bread of heaven and he often fed people who were hungry. In fact, Jesus said when we feed the hungry we are feeding him (Matthew 25:35). In other words, when we are in the midst of hungry people, we are in his presence. Sharing a meal with hungry people is a tangible expression of love and respect for all of life. A meal

shared is prayer in action. What can bless you more when you are hungry than eating?

The night before Jesus died, the last thing he did with all his disciples was to have a table ready so they could all eat one last supper together. He broke some bread and passed a cup of wine around and said that we are to eat and drink and remember him. What a concrete way to remember our Lord. We hear the words, “This is my body, this is my blood, given for you.” We see it before us as it is handed to us. We feel it in our hand. We smell the bread (likely not if it is a wafer!) but at least the wine as we bring it to our mouth. And finally we taste it as we put it in our mouth. All five senses are engaged in this meal at the table.

Sheri learned the power of food and the gift of the table for conversation and laughter from her mom. She also saw the importance of food at work through her dad who loved to prepare and serve food out of a spirit of generosity for hungry people. Sheri carries the presence of Jesus and his love for all people as she organizes the menu, involves a team to prepare the food and others to help serve at the Rockford Rescue Mission. What she has seen and learned through her parents and her faith, she now passes on to her kids and grandkids as well as others.

The experience of Peter, James and John on the mount of Transfiguration was literally a high point in their life together. The voice of God spoke in the midst of a cloud, the appearance of Moses and Elijah and a super illuminated Jesus was out of this world. The three disciples wanted to stay and linger. In a more down to earth way, the presence of the Lord in a meal shared at the Rescue Mission causes people to be filled with good food, much gratitude and oftentimes a desire to linger around the table and talk. Whether they know it or not, Jesus



says he is present! Jesus taught us to pray “Give us this day our daily bread.” This is that prayer in action. Whether she knows it or not, Sheri is an instrument of the presence of the Lord when she offers up her prayer in action!

**Questions to Consider:**

1. The voice of God spoke from the cloud and told Peter, James and John “to listen to Jesus.” One of the ways followers of Jesus listen to him is to study Jesus stories in the four gospels. How do you listen to a gospel a story?
2. Are you more comfortable listening to Old or New Testament stories? Why? What would help you feel more confident to study any Bible book?
3. We have spent the better part of 2017 in the gospel of Mark. Have you found new and helpful insights in this study? If so, what are a few of those important learnings?
4. What is a take away for you from the story of the transfiguration of Jesus?

**Notes**

## **Week 3. READ: Mark 9:14-29**

### **Show Time**

Upon closer review, there is a lot of stuff to unpack in this story. Let's get at it. When Jesus, Peter, James and John returned from their not-so-routine trip to the mountain, they found the other nine disciples embroiled in a conflict with some religious leaders. A crowd had formed according to 9:14-16. Because the rationale for the argument that is proposed in v. 17 that the disciples of Jesus could not drive out an evil spirit from a boy offers no reason for a dispute with the scribes, some scholars think that vv. 14-16 have been added by Mark to dramatize and widen the scope of the Jesus impact through this miracle.

On an aside, nothing constructive or helpful happens when we argue doctrine. The disciples had been given authority to drive out evil spirits (Mark 6:7) but could not accomplish anything when they allowed themselves to get sucked into a debate about religion. Such arguments rarely go anywhere productive and it is always about who is right or wrong. It is a waste of time to argue about God.

Instead, it is our way of life, our attitudes and behavior that is a more powerful witness to who we are in Christ Jesus. Words do matter and they are powerful in our witness to our faith and its impact on our life when we in fact live out the love and mercy of God. At that point, our invitation to come and see in worship is authentic: our words and actions line up.

An aspect of this story that causes some pause is that it seems that the boy suffers from epilepsy. This disease is treatable with medicine today. We would not classify epilepsy in any way as the work of an evil spirit. However, this story is 2000 years old and the events in the life of the boy were interpreted as they best understood.

The presence of faith, or the lack of it, is the central message of this story. The response of the crowd that “ran” to Jesus speaks of the electricity among people where ever Jesus showed up. Who are the “faithless” ones? Did he mean the scribes, or his disciples or the boy’s father? It is unclear. A comment by Jesus that is easy to miss is his query about “how much longer” (v. 19)? Behind this lays his frustration as well as a reminder of this call and mission from God.

When the child saw Jesus, a seizure happened. It is described as the reaction of the unclean spirit when it comes into Jesus’ presence. In desperation, as a father of a child suffering with this demon since childhood, he begs Jesus, “If you are able, please set my son free”. Was this a challenge to garner a response from Jesus, to prod him to action, or an expression of doubt? Jesus replies in his characteristic way of reversing a question or a comment back on the challenger: *If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes* (v. 23). In other words, Jesus says that the question of whether or not his son can be set free is if he as the petitioner believes this can happen. Jesus is evoking faith.

## **Soul Sower**

Bill is a good example of one who owns his own life and uses his new life to help others. In 2008, Bill was diagnosed with spinal meningitis and was hospitalized for four months. As a result of his illness, Bill experienced a

significant brain injury which impacted him mentally as well as physically. As a crane operator in Texarkana, Arkansas, he faced a long road of rehabilitation but his life would be forever changed.

His mom, Jackie Haynes, who had been with him throughout his hospitalization, brought him to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago for six months in the fall of 2008. After that, Bill did out-patient rehabilitation work for an additional six to eight months. Finally, in late 2009, Bill was able to go back to his home in Arkansas and live independently. Knowing that he could not operate heavy equipment which he had done his whole work life up to that point, Bill re-entered college and graduated in May of 2013 with a B.A. degree in social work.

Life changes continued in Bill's life as his mom was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and he moved to Rockford, Illinois in July 2013 to provide care. Jackie Haynes had served on the church council when I was called to Grace Church in November 2006. Her fight with cancer was short in some respects and felt long in other ways. Through many visits, conversations, Bible reading and prayer, Jackie, Bill and I walked this road together. Finally in April 2014, Jackie went to be with the Lord.

Jackie was a strong person of faith who became a bridge to Grace Church for Bill. While she was physically able, Jackie came to healing prayer services at Grace. Cancer is an insidious disease that triggers my angry bone when I see it target people with big hearts, overflowing with compassion and still so much to live for. Jackie lost the fight with amazing graciousness. She is at peace in the presence of God.

In the fall of 2014, Bill was ready to return to the working world having received a job at RAMP (Regional Access Mobilization Project) in Rockford. While Bill faces the challenges of his brain injury on a daily basis like losing his balance and falling down, not thinking right and has a big issue with short-term memory loss, Bill has been a real asset to many other people with brain injuries. He has fought for them in court, worked to get his clients the benefits they need and deserve, and even helped us at Grace get our parking lot up to code for handicapped parking signage.

When it comes to life and faith, Bill still experiences ups and downs yet pushes through with God's help to work for what is just and right for his clients. He gives the best he can to the vocation to which he is now called. His witness to his faith by how he lives his life and shares his love of the Lord where possible has resulted in some new faces joining Bill in worship: Patty and Mike, Debbie, Rob and Bob. God uses us whoever we are and with whom we live, work and serve. Bill has a circle of people that he encounters in life and only he can reach with the love of the Lord. This is true for each one of us. Bill has embraced his challenges and opportunities and as a result, Jesus' love for the world is released through Bill to his acquaintances. Lives are being impacted for good and for God.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. How comfortable are you with praying? What questions do you have about prayer? Why do you pray?
2. Do you prefer to use written or memorized prayer, spontaneous prayers or silent meditation? Because prayer is both speaking and listening, which aspect do you prefer? Who comes to mind as a role model of prayer for you?

3. What would be helpful for you to give you greater confidence in your life of prayer?
4. What is your take away from today's study?

## **Notes**

## **Week 4. READ: Mark 9:30-37**

### **Show Time**

The disciples of Jesus argued about who was the “greatest.” Mohammad Ali famously said: “I am the greatest.” John Lennon of the Beatles said on March 4, 1966: *Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I'll be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first – rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me.* What is your desire for “greatness?” If it is not about being important or influential, perhaps many of us at least want to leave behind an impact in the lives of family, friends and our community.

The way of greatness as a follower of Jesus in and through the community of Christ is to live as a humble servant of others. The attitude of humility is scattered throughout the New Testament (both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 refer to Proverbs 3:34). The spiritual discipline of humility as well as the whole attitude of being a Christ follower is captured well in Philippians 2:1-4: *If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*” These verses describe the character of Christ Jesus.

It must be stated that for anyone who finds themselves in an abusive relationship, has been abused by others in the past, or anyone who battles self-esteem or mental health issues, these verses are not intended for you. They can cause self-loathing, depression and justify being abused. This is not God's intended purpose for you or anyone!

Though humility is not named specifically in the reading in Mark 9:33-37, it can be inferred from the call to those who want to be great – to be first – must be last. This is further explained in an illustration or parable of the wedding banquet in Luke 14:7-11. The advice is given to take the lowest or last seat at the meal so if necessary or if invited you can move up. The attitude of the guest is to be grateful to just have a seat at the table. Do not assume to deserve anything more. Rid yourself of arrogance and prestige. Put off airs. Be content with taking the lowest or last seat.

Pride as displayed in an attitude of “deserve” has been a long-time marketing tool in our culture. It is coupled with the idea of entitlement. My question is “who said you deserve anything?” On top of it, confusing “want” and “need” is commonplace in our society. Humility embraces our needs but differentiates between our wants and avoids the feeling that we deserve recognition, services or special attention.

In addition to humility, followers of Jesus live as servants of others. Jesus said, *whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all* (Mark 9:35). Again Jesus said, *...but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many*, (Mark 10:43b-45). Jesus taught his followers to do what he was doing. He did not tell them to do



something that he was not doing himself. That is an authentic teacher.

## **Soul Sower**

If there is one category of ministry where Grace has so many people whose stories are significant it is the ministry of serving others. It is impossible to go wrong with any choice of humble servant at Grace but almost wrong to choose just one. Back in the day, by that I mean from 2011 – 2013, we gave out a metal lunch pail award to a servant we recognized that month. Just a few of the names we recognized were: Ben Sherven and Arnie Foss, who like Don Anderson, Bob Smith, Leonard Novak, Ron Knorr and Rich Cronberg did extra-mile maintenance on our facility. On the feeding the hungry side of service, we gave the pail to Sheri Cannell for her leadership with the Rockford Rescue Mission; Jane Workinger and Kim Donovan for their work with Carpenter's Place; and Elmer and Janice Little for their work in serving meals at the Mobile Food Pantry.

In addition, we recognized Joni Meichtry and her coordination of the Blood Mobile, Laura Jean Gray as the queen of the Sanctuary Choir. Sue Hoffmann received recognition for her service with our Preschool Board and Judy Johnson for her work and leadership with the innovative youth bakery called *Quixotic*. Recognized for their tireless work with the Big Band Dance was Ted (Margie) Lahn and Sandra Knorr as well as an anchor in years past in the Sunday School: Helen Knorr. In our commitment to our neighborhood, we recognized our member and alderman: Dick Brinker; as well as Loves Park Elementary School; Rockford Lutheran Schools and champions of Adopt-a-Block: Ron and Debbie Gustafson and Judy Owens for their work on River Park.

Others who have served well at Grace and beyond that have been recognized include: Anne-Marie Kuchinski, Alex and Reed Ortland, the Piecemakers, movie night leaders: Melissa Mason and Meggan McKiness as well the Random Voices of Praise at the 10:30 worship. What a remarkable list of servants! As I look forward to this moment in time, there are many more names and stories that could and should be added to the list!

One other name from the metal lunch pail that demonstrates the spirit of service in the name of the Lord is Angie Wallace. Angie came to worship one Sunday looking for something in her life. Not sure of what to expect or what she was looking for, it was Pastor Terri's word which grabbed her heart that day: *For any who are visiting Grace this Sunday, Grace has a place for you.* Led by her heart for service, Angie has found her place at Grace! While Angie may feel uncomfortable serving on our Council, she does it because of her desire to be a voice for those who are being served by the ministry and compassion of many people of Grace. From organizing and leading the charge for the youth in the clean-up efforts at the *Young At Heart Festival*, to meal at Carpenter's Place, to the kitchen activities during VBS, Angie demonstrates her heart to serve others.

Grace is a servant church that has a long history of serving others in this community. From serving as a mayor, to chairs of various boards, to serving soup and sandwiches, and to knitting hats and gloves for area infants and children, the unnamed list of servants at Grace is long. The intent is not to overlook nor ignore anyone but by naming a few, it happens. Please forgive me as no slight is intended. The stories named are as an example of the width and depth of the servant's heart at Grace. A big thank you to all the humble, behind-the-scenes servants of

Christ. To you the Lord says, *well done, good and faithful servant*, (Matthew 25:21).

**Questions to Consider:**

1. If Jesus came to serve and not be served, in what way can you serve others this week?
2. Who is your role model for serving others? Why?
3. What are your skills you can use to serve?  
Where?
4. Start small. Be consistent. Make a difference.  
What will you do?

**Notes**

## **Week 5. READ: Mark 9:38-50**

### **Show Time**

What do we do when someone else is doing the very same thing we are doing? In the secular world this is referred to as competition. The church has thought at times that one local church competes for worshipers or members with other area churches. Jesus is not in the competition business. His attitude is “Do not worry about any who are not against us and do deeds of power.” The work Jesus and his followers were undertaking was not the property of the church but of God. While the church is called and sent to do God’s work in the world, it is God’s work (direction, possession) not the church’s.

In looking closely at what is said here, some commentators have speculated that this story reflects the competing work of ministry in the early church and not an actual story from the time of Jesus. The reason for this train of thought is based on the simple fact that John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee said of this exorcist that he does not follow “us.” If this was a Jesus story, John should have said he does not follow “you.”

The point of origin of this story does not affect its meaning. If we are all working to extend the reign of God, does it matter what sign is over the door? The mission of God to love and reach people distant from God and the church is a daunting task for us all to engage. There is not enough time to worry about someone else’s sheep. Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us,” (9:40). In other words, as Christians, we are all on the same team.

The whole cup of water discussion is a sign of hospitality and of significant importance in the arid Middle East. The reward addition at the end of v. 41 says that giving water to drink to a Christian in need is like giving it as a gift to God. Similar to the story in Matthew 25 where Jesus said that when you feed the hungry you are feeding him, so too when you share water with the thirsty in Mark 9:41, it is an offering to God.

What follows in 9:42-48 is Jesus warning about temptation. He begins by putting a warning out there to protect children from offense, either destroying faith or bringing about physical harm. This warning can be understood individually or as a community of faith. As a church, we are to keep our eyes cast to protect our children and the kids of the community. For all children are a gift and loved by God.

In the next few verses that talk about sin in reference to the hand, foot and eye, it could be referring to sexual sin. They could also be pointing to a much wider application of sin to include stealing, or bringing harm to others. The question is what are you putting into your mind by casting your eyes on it? For what you observe and study, an imprint is made in your mind. Another question is where are your feet going? Are they taking you to good and healthy places? How about your hands? Are they being used for good for your neighbors and in prayer and praise to God?

Perhaps you have heard this children's song:

*O be careful little eyes what you see  
O be careful little eyes what you see  
There's a Father up above  
And He's looking down in love  
So, be careful little eyes what you see*

*O be careful little hands what you do  
O be careful little hands what you do  
There's a Father up above  
And He's looking down in love  
So, be careful little hands what you do*

*O be careful little feet where you go  
O be careful little feet where you go  
There's a Father up above  
And He's looking down in love  
So, be careful little feet where you go*

Finally, fire is a metaphor for purification in the Christian life, burning away all things unnecessary or harmful. Salt is a purifier for food and the soul. It may have a preserving faith until the end of the world type of meaning here. If salt also refers to your faith, don't lose your saltiness because it is hard to restore.

## **Soul Sower**

Gary has worked collaboratively in the Rockford area for many years, long before collaboration was a popular way of working together. The ministry he founded is called Bridge Ministries ([www.bridgeministries.com](http://www.bridgeministries.com)). This is a perfect name for his work because he is committed to bringing about good in the community through partnerships.

A sample of the list of activities Bridge Ministry is involved in is found on the home page of his Web site which says: *Building trust and friendships with and between Church and community leaders; collaborating with local churches to meet practical needs in our community; mentoring young leaders and encouraging seasoned ones; networking churches, pastors, clergy*

*groups and non-profit organizations to foster greater oneness and cooperation; working to bring racial reconciliation to our city; and partnering with other city reaching efforts.*

While I can only imagine that the pace of partnership building and collaboration is at times frustratingly slow, Gary doggedly persists in this effort. He has a heart and vision for it. Gary is ever listening and looking for new possibilities, new partners, and new dreams. He is energetic yet patient. These are some of Gary's qualities that make him effective in this work.

If there is anyone who fits perfectly into the Transform Rockford way of thinking via collaboration and the long view of change, it is Gary. His leadership in this effort is best seen by not only his presence but also his continued communication with any group with whom he has ever worked. His emails inform and always invite.

Gary is in full alignment with Jesus statement "Whoever is not against us is for us," (9:40). Our community is blessed to have a ministry like Bridge Ministries to be a light shining on the importance of shared work for good and for God.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. What do you see to be the strengths and weaknesses of competition? What are the strengths and weaknesses of collaboration? How about partnering?
2. What value do you see from Grace's partnership with the churches of Tanzania, GPS Faith Community and West Side Church of God in Christ?

3. What value do you see that comes to Grace by being part of the Northern Illinois Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?
4. What do you think God is saying to you in today's reading?

## **Notes**



## **Week 6. READ: Mark 10:1-16**

### **Show Time**

The ethics of discipleship is explored in part in Mark 10:1-31. This section has the makings of a teaching manual or catechism. The topics in these verses include discipleship in marriage (vv. 2-10), discipleship and children (vv. 13-16) and discipleship wealth and possessions (vv. 17-31, the week 7 study).

The geography in 10:1 is confusing as is often the case in Mark. The question of divorce was a hot topic both for Jews and for the Christian church. Eduard Schweizer in *The Good News According to Mark*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977 asserts that Matthew 5:32 has recorded the original Jewish form of this teaching: that the divorced man only commits adultery if he marries a divorce woman whereas the woman who gets divorced is an adulterous simply due to this legal act. At least in the Mark version, adultery is mutual for male and female only if they remarry.

What do we say about divorce today as a community of faith? Here is a collection of my best thoughts as your pastor on the nature of relationships. God created us for relationships with God, with family, neighbors and friends. Special bonds have existed since ancient times that unite people in the covenant of marriage (in the Old Testament, this included polygamy). Not everyone chooses to get married and some have desired to experience marriage but find themselves single. Still other people have searched their soul and know that they are homosexual and have pursued the gift of marriage as well. While God created us for relationships, they do not always work as we hoped or intended. The gift of

marriage can become a burden and no longer be the desire of one or the other partner.

Sin is experienced as a broken relationship. In the first three commandments (of the Ten Commandments given to Moses and the Jews in Exodus 20), God alone wants to be honored, followed and worshiped as our God (Commandment 1), God's name is to be honored and respected not used to "curse, swear, practice magic, lie or deceive" (Martin Luther's Small Catechism, Commandment 2) and keep the Sabbath day as holy unto God as we listen and learn God's word (Commandment 3). When we fail to live as God expects us to live in relationship to God, we search our heart, seek to change and confess our failure to God.

Even in a good marriage, we hurt each other with our words spoken and unspoken and with our actions and inactions. Like in our relationship with God, we learn to examine our hearts, desire to change and ask forgiveness and give forgiveness. It is this give and take and hard work of a relationship that makes a marriage even stronger. When both partners are committed to this work, it is life-giving and knits the hearts and minds as one. When only one party does the heavy lifting, the relationship will only work as long as that one person is willing to bear that burden. This is not the way God intended a marriage to function because it is one sided.

I am not a proponent of open marriage, swinging or infidelity to your spouse. These actions all fall under the category of adultery or unfaithfulness to your partner...even if you both agree to it. Marriage is so much more than sex. Sexual relations are a beautiful thing! It is a gift of God intended for married couples; two people. As a married Christian pastor, I still contend that when both people in a marriage pray together

consistently, it is much more intimate than sex. Prayer involves the heart and the mind and not just the body!

Marriage is about companionship, authentic communication where you can be known and know another person at deep levels, developing healthy conflict and resolution skills, practicing forgiveness on a personal level, as well as the love and enjoyment of sharing your life together. We get the gift of knowing ourselves through the eyes of another. When done well, marriage is the spice that adds amazing flavor to your life.

Adultery is a sin because it breaks trust when one of the partners (usually sneakily) brings another person into this marriage through sexual union. The special bond is broken. One of the partners in the marriage has cast their eyes on another. With repentance, honest confession, and the willingness of the spouse, forgiveness can be given and the road of rebuilding trust may begin. This is not a given. If it happens, it is a gift.

Parents, it is our responsibility as Christians to give wise advice and counsel to our children about sex. This is equally true for our daughters and our sons. It is true I am old school and reserving sex for marriage still has value. Sexual intercourse creates a special memory in the brain. To randomly have sex with whomever you are with is not what God intended. To be making love to your spouse while you are thinking of another person you made love to is committing adultery in your heart. For couples who are living together outside of marriage, what is holding you back from taking the next step and making a life-time commitment? Let's talk and get things moving in the direction of pursuing marriage.

There are expressions of the Christian church that have so strongly condemned divorce that people have been driven

from participating in the meal at the table and even away from faith. There are many factors that lead to divorce. Some marriages are unhealthy and even some that are dangerous to a spouse or their children. While divorce is often messy and if there are children involved it is painful, it happens. It takes work to heal a marriage where there is brokenness and it takes work to heal after divorce. Know this: God is a forgiving and healing God. All people who want to eat at the Lord's table, to receive the forgiveness and love of God are welcome at the table at Grace because this is God's table.

Couples who are living together outside of marriage and desire to receive the forgiveness and love of God are also welcome at God's table at Grace. Gay couples are welcome to receive the love and forgiveness of God. Straight couples who are married are welcome to God's table as well because we are all sinners in need of God's mercy.

Once again, marriage is gift from God. For those who are married, keep working at this important relationship. For those who are single, you are equally loved by God. Marriage is not for everyone – just listen to the Apostle Paul chat about that in his letters as he boasts of his singleness! The point is that God created us for relationships, married and otherwise. Value them, work at them, and be blessed and blessing through them. Not the least of which is our relationship with God.

### Discipleship and Children (vv. 13-16)

The old adage “children are to be seen and not heard” may have roots in a biblical story like this text. While it is clearly not the attitude of Jesus, it is reflected in the actions of his disciples. The disciples function like the secret service for Jesus screening those who had access to

him. It is a controversy story brought about by the disciples speaking “sternly” to the parents bringing their children to Jesus to bless them with his touch. Jesus responds to his disciples with “indignation” at their attitudes.

Jesus had recently invited a child who was in the house with the disciples and himself in Capernaum to enter the circle of conversation (9:9:33-37). As Jesus sat, he wanted to make clear that greatness as one of his followers meant that they were humble and servant-minded. Holding this child, Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me,” (v. 37). The disciples just a few verses later (10:13-16) are portrayed as missing the point of Jesus about children once again.

Despite the fact or maybe because of the fact that children were overlooked in the culture in Jesus’ day, he once again jabs the listeners in the ribs to make the point that no one, including children are outside the scope of the love and concern of God. In point of fact, Jesus’ teaching says that children are a perfect example of what entrance into the kingdom of God looks like...*receiving the kingdom as a child means receiving it without ambition to be a figure of authority, but being content to be “last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:33-37, quotation from v. 35). The threat “shall surely not enter into it” in 10:15 foreshadows the saying of v. 25, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” This link suggests that receiving the kingdom as a child means receiving it without being held back by wealth and possessions, (Collins, p. 473).*

Jesus welcomes the children into his arms, lays his hands on them as he does in some healing stories and blesses them (v. 16). There is a natural energy released as we touch another person. There is even greater energy and power exchanged in the spiritual action of blessing. The action of the disciples is rebuked and the desire of young parents with children was met with the welcome blessing of Jesus.

## **Soul Sower**

Grace has been blessed for many years with passionate people of faith who love teaching and caring for children. Back in the day, the children's ministry was called "Christian Education." As I review the history of Christian educational coordinators, there are some people I do not know: Bob Hammerstrom (heard many great things about him), Margaret Piper, Char Kronser and Anne Holzapfel. Gifted and caring CE coordinators that I do know are: Carol Johnson, Mary Edwards, Judy Kretsinger, Jane Freehauf, Mindy Clark and Julie Frykman. What a solid team of educators who love children and the Lord!

Mindy and Julie served on the Grace staff with me and I am so appreciative of their exemplary leadership. Like Jesus, they blessed many children with their faith and the solid core of teachers they gathered and led. Our current director of children and family ministry is Amanda Monroe, someone I love dearly as my daughter! She carries on the strong foundation that the coordinators before her have laid.

Comments that other people have shared with me about Amanda fall into three categories. First of all, she is very relational. She sets children and parents at ease. This creates an atmosphere of welcome and inclusion.

Knowing that you matter and have a place where you belong is important. This is both an important Christian value as well as a characteristic that Grace has worked at for years.

Secondly, Amanda brings creativity and fun to her work. Many families have expressed their appreciation for the Faith Fix boxes they take home to encourage faith conversations around their dinner tables. The July 2017 *Living Lutheran* magazine picked up on this story and wrote a feature article about Amanda and Faith Fix.

Another example of Amanda's creativity was the launching of Mom and Tots. This midweek group has grown wide and serves many mom's and tots most of whom are not part of the Grace community. Through a safe place for tots to play and mom's to socialize, it has been a source of new friendships and good fun. Out of these relationships a few moms have made their way into our worship life at Grace. At the very least, Mom and Tots has been a blessing to many young families.

Grace Kids (aka Life School) has been reworked and refocused by Amanda as well. Autumn 2017 will see a new, exciting and engaging approach to experiencing the stories of faith as they relate to the life of our children. The Education Team at Grace is very excited and supportive of this new launch.

Finally, a number of people who are involved in VBS, Preschool chapel, the children's choir, or the other offerings for children's ministry have appreciated Amanda's love and faith that are evident as they observe her at work with kids. She teaches prayer by praying with the children. Stories of faith are taught from Scripture through story and song. Kids are attracted to Amanda because they sense God at work in her in a compelling

and fun way. Like Jesus, Amanda knows that children are important to God and have the capacity for faith. All they need is the opportunity to experience God and to learn. Kids have the capacity to trust God in a way that adults need to rediscover.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. The disciples were miffed by parents who brought their children to Jesus for his blessing. What does this story say to us as a church about children?
2. How could our worship be more engaging for children and youth?
3. What do you think would strengthen our children's ministry?
4. Children's ministry can grow the church community. What young parent and their child can you invite to check out our children's ministry this week? Write the names down and contact them.

**Notes**



## Week 7. READ: Mark 10:17-31

### Show Time

The ancient question that remains relevant to many people today asks: *if there is such a reality as life after death or eternal life, how can I obtain it?* Someone recently expressed this sentiment about a very successful and rich school classmate who died: *His parents never went to church nor did he but he was a good man. He did a lot of good in our community and much of it very privately.* The scriptures are clear that God alone issues judgement and not us (Matthew 7:1ff; 2 Timothy 4:1). Let us not foolishly try and step into God's business who is a God of mercy and knows what we will never know about anyone's life including their faith in God.

Returning to the question of the man who in his urgency for an answer from the teacher ran to him and knelt down in respect and asked: *what must I do to inherit eternal life* (v. 17)? Jesus rebuffs the man when he referred to Jesus as "good," because God alone is good. In a spirit of true humility, Jesus always defers all honor and praise for anything good that he may do or say to God. It is interesting to note that when the man refers to the teacher again at the end of this story, he no longer calls Jesus good but only "teacher" (v. 20).

Because this question of receiving eternal life is so central in the minds of people, religious leaders and other rabbi's offer a variety of answers including the keeping of the Torah – the law in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis – Deuteronomy). Jesus reminds the man (the ruler in Luke 18:18) of the second part of the Ten Commandments dealing with relationships with one's neighbor (see Leviticus 18:5).

Jesus quotes certain commandments:

- Do not kill (commandment 5 for Catholics & Lutherans and 6 for Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Reformed churches. See also Exodus 20:12-16 & Deuteronomy 5:16-20 for each of the commandments named by Jesus).
- Do not commit adultery (commandment 6 for Catholics & Lutherans and 7 for Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Reformed churches).
- Do not steal (commandment 7 for Catholics & Lutherans and 8 for Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Reformed churches).
- Do not bear false witness (commandment 8 for Catholics & Lutherans and 9 for Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Reformed churches).
- Do not defraud (which is not one of the Ten Commandments and is removed from the story in Matthew 19:16-22 & Luke 18:18-23. It may summarize a teaching about the sin of defrauding others in Leviticus 6:1-7).
- The final commandment Jesus names is: honor your father and your mother (commandment 4 for Catholics and Lutherans and 5 for Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Reformed churches).

The response of the man to Jesus says that he has met the requirements since his youth. “Jesus’ looking intently at him and loving him indicates that he recognizes that the man has great potential as a disciple. He then tells the man that he lacks one thing. The dialogue implies that, as far as Jesus is concerned, keeping the commandments is sufficient for inheriting eternal life. The man, however, seeks something more,” (Collins, p. 479). If the man was content with his obedience in fulfilling the Commandments as enough to receive eternal life, he would have said “thank you” and walked away praising

God. Instead, he speaks of his obedience and looks at Jesus.

In a spirit of compassion, Jesus looks at the man and names one more thing he must do to be freed from the distraction of possessions: sell them and share the wealth with the poor, then come and be a disciple. Instead of taking on this action, the man is crushed because his possessions have him by the ankle.

## **Soul Sower**

While Jesus got the fun question about how to make sure you are doing what you need to do to inherit eternal life, as a pastor, this is not the question or comment I hear today. Here are questions and comments I have heard in the last couple of years. I invite you to think about how you would respond. Do not judge. How can you invite further conversation and exploration? You do not need to answer the questions correctly. It can simply be a dialogue. The best learning happens when we discover for ourselves rather than being given a pat answer.

- My family and I have been through so much recently, I find it next to impossible to believe that there can be a loving God somewhere.
- I am spiritual but not religious. I have found my own path. My parents forced me to go to Mass when I was a kid. I was an altar boy and did all that. I have not been back since. I don't miss it. I don't need it. It may be good for some people but not me.
- My wife does the church stuff for the family. I work all week sometimes even on Saturdays. Sunday is my only day all week to sleep in and get caught up on my rest.

- My parents forced me to go to church when I was a kid even though they never went. I am not doing that to my kids. When they get old enough, they can choose for themselves.
- I used to go to Grace when I was a kid and the church was bursting at the seams. Occasionally I will watch a video of the sermon online and I have to ask, where are all the people? It looks like a ghost town. What happened?
- Don't bother me with all that religious mumbo jumbo. I just don't buy that.
- My wife and I try and get there when we can. But our kids, that is a different story. We brought them up in the church but they don't have the time of day for it now. Our grandkids have never been to church. Don't get me wrong, they say a prayer before they eat and on holidays we pray the Lord's Prayer together. But talk to them about getting the kids baptized? Nope, not having it.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Who is a model for you of being a loving witness of Jesus?
2. What can our lay people do to show Jesus love to our family members and neighbors?
3. What do you think is the main reasons people are turned off by church and religion?
4. What should we learn from this?

### **Notes**

## **Week 8. READ: Mark 10:32-45**

### **Show Time**

The final days before Jesus enters Jerusalem is indicated by the fact that they were on the road with that destination in mind (v. 32). Jesus is leading the way. The disciples are literally following. This is a metaphor for discipleship. Jesus is pressing into the future that lay in front of him. His disciples who have Jesus in sight leading them are still afraid of what the future holds.

In this final prediction of his suffering, death and rising from the dead, unlike the first prediction when he speaks openly about it (8:32), this time he takes his disciples away from others on the road to speak privately to them. This third time Jesus gives much more detail referring to what is about to take place: his condemnation to death (at the hands of the high priest and the Jewish council – 14:53-65); being turned over to the gentiles in 10:33 (Jesus being handed over to Pilate and the trial that followed – 15:1-15); and he will be mocked, spat on and whipped in 10:34 (Jesus punishment by the Roman soldiers – 15:16-20). Mark 10:33-34 serves to foreshadow the traumatic events in Jesus' life on the horizon.

The third and final prediction of Jesus suffering and death is followed by a third teaching on discipleship. Greatness as a follower of Jesus is not about power, authority or control. Instead, the way of discipleship is the way of serving others. It is other-focused. When we serve others, we are working for their good. Outdo each other in selflessly giving yourself away for the sake of others. Ironically, it is always true that as we give of ourselves for the sake of others, we end up receiving more than we ever give. Even if you cannot see what you are receiving

in return, keep giving. For it is not about receiving but rather about the call to serve which is another form of giving.

Giving is catchy. As we serve others, their life and situation improves. When a small force of people are serving others in a community, like mowing and weeding a yard, doing plumbing repairs, or simply listening with a caring heart to a neighbor going through a hard time, the community is strengthened. Like a snowball that starts rolling down a snow-covered mountain, it gains momentum and grows larger in impact. So it is as the word spreads about a movement of service, it grows more and a wider group of people want to be part of it. This is a part of giving back to our community.

The conversation with James and John with Jesus was not about giving or serving but rather about position and privilege. This is an abrupt turn of subject from the powerful prediction of all that awaits Jesus in the near future. Their presumptuous plea for Jesus to do for them what they are about to ask...“recalls the extravagant promise that Herod made ‘to his daughter Herodias,’ who danced for him and his guests (Mark 6:17ff)...The similarities of the two statements suggests that James and John are speaking in an equally thoughtless and extravagant manner,” (Collins, p. 495). They were asking Jesus for the best seats in the house in the coming kingdom.

Jesus’ response to James and John makes clear his displeasure with their ask. When Jesus speaks about a baptism he is not referring to a literal Christian baptism. It is a metaphor. In fact, James will suffer the noblest death at the hands of a Roman which is by the sword or beheaded (Acts 12:1-2). “From a Roman point of view, this was the most honorable method of execution.

Crucifixion, the way Jesus was executed, on the contrary, was the most shameful,” (Collins, p. 498). Scripture does not tell us how John died. Despite their boldness, Jesus makes clear that to sit in the seats of honor, the right and the left of his throne in glory has already been determined.

When the other ten disciples catch wind of the selfish action of James and John, they are understandably angry. Jealousy, suspicion and a fracturing of the community is a natural reaction and outcome from secret forays to grab power for yourself. Such actions are divisive and outside of the teaching on what discipleship looks like. Jesus calls them all back and reminds them that unlike the gentiles who pursue and use power and prestige to rule unjustly over others, this is not how Christian community is to function. Greatness is determined by those who serve most.

The story of James and John unfortunately has been lived out in Christian communities throughout history and across cultures and has led to many factions, disgruntled members, a negative witness to the outside world and has driven significant ministries into the ditch of despair. The slow and often subtle drip, drip, drip of competition, cunning actions and back-stabbing sisters and brothers in Christ is how the world works but runs contrary to the teaching of Jesus on discipleship, how his followers are to behave. Many of Paul’s letters in the New Testament spend time dealing with tensions among leaders and members of the church. While problems among Christians is not surprising, it is not the way of Christ and it detracts from the vitally important mission which we are called to be about.

Jesus called James and John and the other ten together and held them accountable. He did not sweep the

problem under the rug but met it head on and refocused them on true greatness. It is not about seats of honor but service. Stop scheming and get to work. Do not look to line your own nest but open your eyes to serve others. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,” (10:45). This is a key instance of Jesus saying clearly, “Do what I do.”

## **Soul Sower**

Who comes to mind as a person who lives their life looking for opportunities to help others yet not seeking recognition for it? Those who do it best are hard to see because they do it behind the scenes. For that very reason, the story of this “soul sower” will be told anonymously. This woman is always listening to others, often at the edge of a conversation where her presence is not noticed. She listens with both her ears and her heart. After she goes home she sets to work like the shoemakers elves.

The back bedroom of her home is her sewing office where she creates her projects of love like magic. She is far from wealthy but very thrifty and buys much of her material on sale – big sales. While it is now only this woman and her husband living at her home, she has a garden that would supply food for a family of twelve. In the summer, whenever she is not sewing or knitting, she is out tending her garden, watering, weeding, and harvesting what is ready. Nothing goes to waste. She loves to cook, bake and freeze for emergencies.

It took me a few years to figure out who was doing so many acts of kindness for others without leaving a trace. I finally put the pieces of the puzzle together. Mind you, I stink at details and am famous for all the things I do not notice. This mystery elf however, had me curious enough



that I worked hard at noticing who knew about what emergency and whose tell-tail gifts of sewing, cooking, and baking were provided to meet this need. Without disclosing my discovery, the light finally came on and I knew whose hard work of compassion was blessing so many.

Here are just a small example of the impact of one servant. There was a house fire in the dark of night that a family of five survived without serious injury. While the community at large and the school the children attended provided coats and gently used clothing, toys and other furnishings which was great, there were some mysterious gifts given as well. While they stayed at their aunt's house, a Thanksgiving styled frozen meal was discovered on the picnic table with a simple note of encouragement attached. Later that week, someone called the church office and anonymously said that a meal for this family was in the refrigerator at the church and would they please notify the family. A beautiful, new outfit for each of the children was wrapped and found in the aunt's mailbox one day. The tell-tale sign of this woman's work is that it was always neat, very tasty and made with love.

An elderly man who lived alone had a major fall and broke his jaw in many places. His jaw had to be wired and screwed back into place. Not only was it very painful, but he experienced a number of set-backs in his recovery. It was long. When he finally got home, he had lost twenty-five pounds in this ordeal. Tasty meals began to appear on his porch and ironically, it was as if someone knew his favorite recipes. They even seemed to know he had an allergy to dairy products. Each meal was ready to heat up and eat and its presentation was stunning.

One last example I will share is of a mother of three who in the last three months of her fourth pregnancy was

limited to bed rest. The same mysterious pattern began. It was delicious meals, homemade toys for the kids, new coloring books and color crayons for each of them one day, new outfits for them, and a present for the children to give to their new baby sister. Somehow, this mystery elf knew what only a few close friends knew, that mom was having a baby girl.

While this woman has time and talents to generously bless people, not many of us have that kind of time or even that much skill to help others. What is clear is this woman offers her help not seeking reward or recognition. Jesus said greatness is serving others for the sake of serving others. It is an act of humility and selflessness. It offers tremendous joy to bless others when that alone is our purpose. We are encouraged to follow Jesus' example who came to serve, not be served.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. What is your response to the actions of James and John? Have you seen that kind of posturing happening in the church? How did that effect you?
2. What areas of discipleship do you want to grow in? When do you feel closest to God?
3. What would help you to draw even closer to the Lord? What would that look like?
4. Who is God calling you to love and serve?

### **Notes**

## **Week 9. READ: Mark 10:46-52 (Bartimaeus healed)**

### **Show Time**

The story of Bartimaeus is a transitional story in the gospel of Mark. On the one hand, this is the last story of the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem for his final week beginning on what is known as Palm Sunday (11:1ff). On the other hand, the section that began with Jesus healing a blind man in Bethsaida (8:22ff), followed by his first prediction of his suffering and death, now ends with the healing of blind Bartimaeus which was preceded by the third prediction of his suffering and death.

The last stop on the road to Jerusalem was Jericho. While Mark has Bartimaeus sitting by the road as they left Jericho, Luke tells the story as they were entering the village (Luke 18:35ff). This detail is really irrelevant. The reason I mention it is because Luke has added a story when they enter Jericho: the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector to whose house Jesus goes and forever changes Zacchaeus life. His radical conversion results in unheard of generosity and financial restitution (Luke 19:1ff).

The road is crowded as they leave Jericho. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting by the road, hears that among the crowd heading for Passover in Jerusalem is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was identified in Mark early on as coming from Nazareth in Galilee (1:9) to be baptized by John. After returning to Galilee and calling his first disciples, Jesus goes to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee where he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and is identified by a man with an unclean spirit as Jesus of Nazareth (1:24). From this first miracle to his last, the healing of Bartimaeus of Jericho (10:47), these are the only times Jesus is identified in this way outside of his final week in Jerusalem. Jesus is mentioned as being

from Nazareth in 14:67 and again at his resurrection in 16:6.

With the sound of many feet passing by on the road, Bartimaeus began to shout for Jesus, hoping to catch his attention wherever he may be in that crowd. Another perspective on this story, “It may be, however, that the address of Jesus as the son of David is not linked primarily to Jesus’ power to heal, but rather manifests Bartimaeus’s prophetic gift. In Greek myths the association of blindness with compensatory supernatural gifts was common. Thus, Bartimaeus’s cry is a revelation of Jesus’ identity, comparable to Peter’s confession in 8:29,” (Collins, p. 510).

Whether it is the prophetic testimony of Jesus’ identity or his cry for help, the action of Bartimaeus elicits a reaction by the crowd who try and silence him. Conflict makes the story more interesting. Bartimaeus responds to the crowd by shouting even louder. In a refrain picked up in worship from “Son of David, have mercy on me,” (10:48) comes words of prayer: Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy. Or, in the Jesus’ Prayer of the Eastern Orthodox Church: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

“Jesus stood still” (v. 49). He was stopped in his tracks by the plea for mercy. This is the only time this phrase appears in the gospel. After all the healings, exorcisms, teachings and miracles, from his treks across Galilee, to the Decapolis region on the eastern side of the Jordan, to Tyre and Sidon on the East coast of the Mediterranean Sea, to Caesarea Philippi in the North, and now on to Jericho and Jerusalem, Jesus feet stopped moving. He was frozen in place. The cry for mercy gave Jesus pause to stop and call Bartimaeus to come.

The adversarial crowd now changes their tune and they become people of encouragement. They help to convey to him that Jesus was summoning him. He throws off his cloak and comes to Jesus. Like other call stories, when Jesus calls, people pick up and go leaving their past life behind. James and John, Peter and Andrew left their nets as fisherman (1:18) and Levi, his tax booth (2:14). Leaving his cloak behind, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the road to Jerusalem (10:52).

When Bartimaeus came to Jesus, he asked the blind man what he wanted him to do for him. This is a great example of asking clarification and not assuming you know what a person wants. When someone wants you to pray for them, ask them what they want you to pray about. Ask for further clarification or more information before you start to pray if the request is still fuzzy. Do not rush to pray until you are clear about the prayer request.

I was asked to pray for a grandmother who was very ill. Without asking any questions, in my eagerness to get praying, I started praying for her healing. Very quickly, the granddaughter interrupted me to say that her grandmother had been sick for a long time and was dying. She now made it clear that she did not want healing but a peaceful death. Opps!

“Rabbi, let me see again,” (v. 51). Apparently this man had lost his sight and was not blind from birth. Jesus tells him as he told others in healing stories to “go.” As he goes, his sight is restored. This is reminiscent of the healing of the man with leprosy (1:44), the paralytic (2:11), as well as the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (5:19). In each of these instances, because of the miracle and their encounter with Jesus, their circumstances changed. All three of these healings meant they were no

longer estranged from family but could in fact go home. Meanwhile, Bartimaeus, it seems, became a follower of Jesus and joined him in Jerusalem.

## **Soul Sower**

While worship can be the action of an individual (as seen in the words of Psalms expressing individual praise like Psalm 9, 18, 30, 92 & 138) as they give thanks and praise to God, worship is more commonly experienced as an action of the gathered faith community. We can read and meditate on Scripture alone which is great but when we come together with our church community the Word comes alive in a different way.

It is in communal worship that we celebrate Jesus meal of love and forgiveness, listen or sing along with many voices as we sing stories of faith and words of praise, pray big prayers for nations, churches, issues of justice and peace in our world, and special situations globally and locally that require our attention as we bring these prayers before God, and hear the Word read and preached. When two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, he promised to be in our midst. Invariably something good and moving happens when the church comes together to worship.

Dare I say, when I think about worship there is not one person that stands out as a prime example of worship for me. Rather, many faces flip by as I close my eyes and recall worship at 7:30, 9:00 and 10:30. The early-riser service is filled with many open ears listening intently to the Word, some strong congregational singers, a host of deeply prayerful people, and a love to gather around the meal weekly. Worship at 7:30 feels warm and friendly.

At the liturgical service at 9:00, worship is often led by the Sanctuary Choir and the organ. Faces singing in the choir often show passion, listening to each other and an enjoyment in singing God's praise. While the flow of the worship is predictable for anyone who has hung out at 9:00 for a while, it also makes sense from a developmental stand point. As I flip through faces at 9:00 I see hard working yet contented faces singing in the choir, a degree of expectation for what will be shared in the sermon, and faces that show respect in the presence of God.

The 10:30 worship is relaxed yet up-tempo, projected with volume. The worship team sets the table for the energy and attentiveness week to week. The 10:30 community has a solid core with a larger portion of the community that changes from week to week with members and new people. In some ways, this worship takes more energy and intentionality than the other two. In other words, it also can give more energy. Some faces easily engage in worship. Others are distant and hesitant.

God desires and deserves our thanks and praise no which worship service. So many factors go into our experience of worship. At the bottom line, if you come with an open heart and mind, God will meet you there and help you to find what you are looking for.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Like Bartimaeus, has someone told you to be quiet in the presence of God?
2. If you imagine Jesus stopping everything he is doing and standing still as you worship, what would you tell him?
3. What do you enjoy most about worship? What do you find not helpful and maybe even distracting?

4. If you could change one thing in worship, what would it be?

## **Notes**