

## **Serving and Welcoming All in Jesus Name**

A sermon delivered by Zac Klassen on September 12, 2021 at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

We began our morning singing a familiar hymn with familiar words:

“What is this place where we are meeting? Only a house, the earth its floor, walls and a roof sheltering people, windows for light, an open door. Yet it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know our God is near.”

What an appropriate song to sing as we begin the process of returning to in-person worship. It is an exciting milestone in this pandemic time that we have been living in for the last year and a half and, while not all of us are presently able to be in the building, we trust nonetheless that our gathering in a hybrid format of both in person and on zoom this morning makes us no less a “body that lives,” Christ’s body. I have been struck in the little time that I have been in the building here just how beautiful it is: the BMC building is indeed a gift of God, a space with nearly 150 years of history of Christian worship, leadership, service, praise, and prayer; of laughter, tears, fellowship, and food; a place to celebrate new life and a place to support one another when life ends, a place of baby dedications and baptisms...and so much more. The process of returning to in-person worship in this space brings with it many new things to be excited about: of new opportunities to grow together in community; of welcoming new friends, developing new relationships, and nurturing old relationships; of gifts to be discovered and affirmed; of growth in friendship with God and with each other.

But we also know that a return to in-person worship *is* not and will continue to not be ‘like before.’ We still live in a time of uncertainty and constant change with this ever-lingering pandemic, and we are still not able to *all* gather in person. What it means to be ‘welcomed back’ to in-person worship, then, is not quite a simple matter; in fact, it remains rather complicated. We have public health measures to navigate, children returning to school, the possibility of future lockdowns, and our own personal and collective well-being to attend to. If the complexity of this

time we are in can teach us anything, perhaps it can teach us to expect that in our worship services and in our common life together we will continue to be challenged to follow Jesus “on the way” through an unpredictable journey of faith. Jesus himself was, after all, always moving, rarely sitting still in one temple, synagogue, or town for long. And, Jesus called his disciples to this life “on the way” as well. With this in mind, we do well to remember that regardless of whether we gather in-person or on zoom, we are all called to walk this same discipleship journey together, with all the challenges and surprises that that entails.

As we just heard, the scripture text we are looking at today is from Mark 9:30-37, and it is a helpful picture of what I have just referred to as our discipleship “journey.” After all, this passage describes Jesus and his disciples “*on the way*,” travelling the dusty roads through Galilee and then on to Capernaum. During that journey, Mark recalls two memorable discussions between Jesus and his disciples: one where Jesus confuses the disciples by talking about his own coming death and resurrection (they simply did not understand, Mark 9:32) and another where the disciples start to argue with one another about who is the greatest (Mark 9:34, parallel passages found in Matthew 18:1-5, Luke 9:48). To understand what these episodes might have to teach us about our own discipleship journey this morning, we do well to back up a bit to what happened just prior to these discussions on the road.

Before heading out to Galilee and then Capernaum, Jesus had been with Peter, James, and John high up on a mountain where he was transfigured right in front of their eyes, a display of holiness and power that must have been amazing to see. High up on that mountain, it might have been easy for Peter, James, and John to expect that things would only continue to get more glamorous! Maybe now Jesus was going to bring in the kingdom, and if so, *how privileged, how honoured* were Peter, James, and John, that they had the distinct experience of sharing this

moment with Jesus on the mountain. In fact, Jesus had even told them not to tell anyone else what they had seen until he had risen from the dead—something that they did not really understand—but nonetheless, they had been treated to an exclusive encounter with the glory of God manifesting itself in Jesus (Mark 9:9). But right after this episode, we find Jesus moving with them back down the mountain, entering the down-to-earth ministry of prayer and healing among a much bigger crowd. Evidently, while Jesus, Peter, James, and John had been high up on the mountain, there had been some commotion going on below. Some of Jesus’ other disciples were trying to help a child oppressed by a spirit and they were not having much success. Even though Jesus had earlier given the disciples the authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:15), none of the disciples seem to have been able to help this poor boy. Then Jesus enters the picture. After chastising the disciples and the crowd for their lack of faith, Jesus engages the boy’s father, telling him that “all things can be done for the one who believes.” The father in turn cried out: “I believe; help my unbelief.” (Mark 9:24) Jesus then heals the boy, and everyone is amazed.

The disciples, however, are perplexed: “Why could *we* not cast it out?” “Why was our ministry ineffective?” Jesus’ answer is both telling and a bit cryptic: “This kind can only come out through prayer.” As I read Jesus’ answer, I couldn’t help but wonder: had the disciples not been praying for this child? How *had* they been trying to minister to the child? What exactly had they been doing before Jesus arrived? Well, Mark tells us that when Jesus had first come down the mountain, Jesus had discovered the disciples *arguing* with the scribes (Mark 9:14). Now, Mark does not tell us exactly what they were arguing with the scribes about, but we can read between the lines a bit: perhaps the disciples had been trying to show off the authority and superiority of their ministry and healing this child was the perfect opportunity to try to do so.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Geddert, *Mark (Believers Church Commentary)*, 224.

However, the disciples' failed attempts to heal the child had only served to cause a conflict with the local scribes. Might it be that the disciples had become distracted from what was most important about their ministry for this child by getting caught up in arguments with the scribes about who had the authority to heal or who had the right method of healing or who knew the right ritual to perform? Might it be that the child was the one who was lost in all this arguing? Jesus doesn't seem to even engage the argument that the disciples were engaging in with the scribes. In fact, Mark portrays him in a mode of holy impatience saying: "how much longer must I put up with you [faithless generation]? Bring him [the boy] to me." (Mark 9:19) Jesus steers the focus back on the child, the one who has been lost in all of this, and away from the commotion of the crowd and the fruitless arguing of the disciples and the scribes.

It is helpful to acknowledge these two episodes, first the mountain top transfiguration and then the arguments about the healing of the oppressed boy, because as we return to our passage for today, we find the disciples travelling with Jesus and, can you guess what they are doing? Arguing. The disciples are at it again. Knowing full well what they are arguing about now, Jesus nonetheless asks his disciples: "What were you arguing about on the way?" The disciples don't give Jesus an answer—maybe they felt a bit sheepish because they knew deep inside their arguing was fruitless. They were arguing about *who was the greatest*. We can imagine the argument, beginning with Peter, James, and John making their case: "Oh man, you should have been there! Jesus chose *us* to go up on the mountain with him *and* we got to see...well, we aren't even allowed to tell you what we saw it was so amazing. Clearly we are higher in the ranks than you guys." We can also imagine the other disciples making their case: "Oh ya, well, while you three were high up on your lofty mountain with Jesus, we were left below down here to do the hard work of ministry, and not only that we went head-to-head with the scribes. Jesus probably

took you guys up on the mountain because he couldn't trust you to do the important work he left for us to do." "Ya, and that work went soooooo well!" Peter, James, and John reply. "Jesus had to come back down and clean up *your* mess."

By the time this arguing has had its course, the disciples arrive with Jesus in Capernaum. Addressing their argument, Jesus says to them: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Let's pause for a moment and reflect on these terms: "first," "last," and "all." In this context, when Jesus refers to the "first" and the "last" he is speaking about a person's status in their social environment: so, the "first" is a person who has the "highest rank," or "honour," or "authority" in that social environment. And, of course, "last" here is understood to be a person who has the lowest rank, the least honour, or the least authority in their social environment. It is not hard for us to imagine these social status indicators and the way they might have impacted communities in Jesus' day since we have a pretty good idea how social status indicators impact our own communities today.<sup>2</sup> Whether we like it or not, we can readily point to who are considered "first" and who are considered "last" in terms of social power and influence in our communities. What is shocking is the way that Jesus upends those categories by claiming that in God's kingdom, those who are "first" in the world's eyes will be last in God's kingdom and those who are "last" in the world's eyes will be first in God's kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

But what about the little word "all?" What does Jesus mean when he says that his disciples must be prepared to be servants of "all." On the face of it, it seems obvious. Jesus is saying that whoever wants to be the greatest in the kingdom of God will be the servant of

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<sup>2</sup> To be sure, our social environments are different in many ways to those Jesus was a part of in his day, but the reality of social disparity itself is universal and, unfortunately, enduring.

<sup>3</sup> While in Mark Jesus focuses on how to be "first," in the other Gospels (Matthew 19:30, Luke 13:30) it becomes clearer that what Jesus describes is also a reversal for those who had been considered "first." Matthew and Luke seem to maybe soften Mark's blunt statement a bit by saying that "many" who are first will be last (Matthew) or that "some" who are first will be last.

everyone—something that indeed Jesus himself was, even unto his death. And yet, we do well to pay attention to the fact that being a servant to “all” does not mean giving everyone the same kind of attention or care. And neither does it mean ignoring the injustices that some of the “all” perpetrate against others. Clearly being a servant of all can also mean, as it did throughout Jesus’ ministry, taking the side of the “least” and the disadvantaged.<sup>4</sup>

This becomes clear in what Jesus does next. Mark tells us that he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Notice what Jesus doesn't do here: he doesn't say: "Whoever welcomes everyone equally in my name welcomes me." No, Jesus singles out a child, one who, socially speaking, does not have a lot of power and influence, who is in many respects most dependent on those around them to survive, and thus most exposed to the possibility of neglect and harm. As I thought about this moment with Jesus, his disciples, and the child, I couldn't help but be drawn back to the child from our earlier passage; the one who had been oppressed by the Spirit but whom Jesus had healed. Here we now have two stories close together of Jesus paying special attention to children; in the one story, Jesus restores the afflicted child's physical and spiritual well being, and in the next, Jesus elevates the child's social well-being by making the welcoming of the child the litmus test for welcoming Jesus and for welcoming God.<sup>5</sup> Being a “servant of all” and

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is pertinent to point to the common arguments that were made during some of the more recent protests carried out by the Black Lives Matter movement. Many people argued that it was unfair to highlight “Black Lives” because “All Lives Matter.” This argument misses the point of the BLM movement and it also misses the point that Jesus makes in this story. Being a “servant of all” for Jesus, did not mean to treat everyone ‘equally,’ in fact, it meant to be in solidarity with those considered the “last.”

<sup>5</sup> In the ancient Greco-Roman world, young people were not exactly given a high social status. In fact, infants and young children could, from a very young age (often from birth) be abandoned, sometimes only to become slaves once they were old enough to work. This child-abandonment is often referred to in the literature as “child exposure” and it was a common practice in Jesus’ time. Reading Mark 9 in light of this social practice, one could say that being “exposed” or abandoned is precisely the opposite of being “received” or “welcomed.”

welcoming the child in the name of Jesus is now cast against a social backdrop where it is most often that those with authority and honour are served and where many others of lower status are cast aside and made to feel unwelcome.

Jesus has been trying to help his disciples to see that following him ‘on the way’ will not help them climb higher up the social ladder of their world; it will not win them honour, authority, or recognition in the ways that the world tends to dish it out. This casts into a new light the arguments that the disciples had been having previously. Their arguments were still stuck in the old thinking: how can we be on top in our social world? Is Peter first? James? John? How can we prove our social power? Fight the scribes? Show them whose boss? Jesus’ response is clear: while you argue and fight to achieve or maintain your social power, look at those around you that you are ignoring? Are you serving all? Are you welcoming all? What about these children you’ve been ignoring? Do you know that by ignoring them, you ignore me and the one who sent me? If you want to walk in my way, says Jesus, you will need to be the servant of those often deemed unworthy, welcoming all in my name, as my representatives, for that is the way to be first in the Kingdom of God.

This is a hard teaching: it was for the disciples of Jesus back then, and it continues to be teaching for us today in our own discipleship journey ‘on the way.’ In many ways, Jesus’ disciples did not understand what he was trying to teach them until after he died on the cross. Even in our passage for today, Jesus tried to help them understand by foreshadowing his own death as he spoke to them along the way, but it wasn’t until after he died that they started to get it. At that moment they saw the depths of what it meant for Jesus, and in turn for them too, to be “servants of all.” Today, as we consider what these stories from the Gospel of Mark have to teach us as we journey with Jesus, we do well to remember that we still have much to learn from

Jesus' radical way of welcoming the least of these in our society. May we, as a congregation that seeks to live the friendship of God, remember Jesus' provocative words: to befriend the least among you, is to befriend me, and to befriend me is to befriend God. AMEN.

**Second Hour Discussion Possibilities:**

1. The disciples were distracted from the ministry that Jesus had called them to by arguing fruitlessly. What distracts us from receiving and ministering to those that God has placed before us?
2. What kinds of ways do we seek to achieve or maintain social status rather than seeking to be "greatest" according to God's kingdom pattern of servanthood?
3. Who are the "first" and "last" in our social world? How might Jesus' declaration of the kingdom challenge us to think differently about who to give honour and authority to in our society?