

Sheperdstown Presbyterian Church  
Reflection – September 20, 2015  
Mark 9: 30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another over who was the greatest. He sat down called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Here is a well-known story with many oft-repeated themes in the Gospels on humility, sacrifice, and the first being last. There may be many lessons offered in these few short verses, this is one that comes to me, from my heart.

First, I think it is important to place these verses within in the larger story that the author of Mark is offering us. I must admit to being partial to this Gospel because it is elegantly simple and relatively short. Mark says what he has to say straight up.

At this juncture in Mark’s version, we are about half way through the story, the easier half. It is about to get much more difficult, even shocking. Jesus knows this and wants to get away to teach his disciples, to prepare them for the more difficult story, to prepare them for the cross, however you interpret that. They are in no position, however, to understand this, focusing not on Jesus, but on themselves. They are totally self-absorbed, so they don’t get it, and this is a major theme of Mark’s that resonates strongly with me. I might even sub-title the work: The Gospel According to Mark: Not Getting Jesus.

So let’s remember that at this point, we are a far piece from dealing with the cross, so I will leave those themes for the more knowledgeable scholars and theologians. And in fact, that is exactly what Jesus does. He backtracks away from the cross to a simpler theme. Baby steps will have to do here.

For me, what is important, is that they are all on a journey. In fact, the story tells us that they are actually moving through Galilee to Capernaum. But more importantly, they are on a spiritual journey, and such journeys are never simple linear paths. They require struggle and wrestling with our own messy basic truths, prerequisites

to moving from self-absorption to self-awareness, to wholeness, and perhaps eventually taking on the far more difficult journey of following Jesus. This I totally get. How often in our spiritual lives do we feel like we are starting over, trying to understand the best way forward, getting distracted, misunderstanding, becoming frustrated over an apparent lack of, well, something. This is a long way from really understanding, let alone living into the ideal of Jesus's "suffering servant." Unfortunately, it is in the suffering that transformation often occurs, and who wants to deal with that.

One response can be, well, we are like the feckless disciples, and not getting it is okay. The problem is that such a response can allow us to move on, happily deluded in our own sense of control (the opposite of faith?), without continuing the struggle, without any deep change in mind and heart or we might say, any real transformation. So for me, this is not enough. I have too many demons to face myself. And as far as I can tell from this congregation I have gotten to know, it is not enough for you either, and that is why we keep coming back, together. And is that not exactly what Jesus is telling his disciples, let's come back, let's step back and let's try this again.

It is in this intention to coming back, that I truly sense we are all part of something much bigger and grander than ourselves, and at the same time, one with it. And arriving at this point is not necessarily a fireworks display. For me it is a simple understanding, a simple "knowing." That's all I get. Arise each day, be conscious of letting go of as many things as I can, try to be aware of the gratitude I should bring to the day, but ultimately leave it open for God to make it all happen. And it happens with no guarantee that we will get to know the full truth, or that we will even have a good day, yet we continue to respond to that tug. For me, the spiritual path is an annoying tug, which is also a tug-of-war with my own ego.

The disciples continue to feel this same tug, follow Jesus, and then come up short. Why? There is one more important lesson; the importance of being like a child. Quite a metaphor! Perhaps also too easily dismissed as "the simple trust of a child." I think there is more here. Before one can move to where Jesus is, to give everything, including one's earthly existence, one must first be ready to receive. If you cannot receive, you will never be able to truly give. But we don't like that because to receive we have to be vulnerable, we have to surrender our sense of control. In short, we must be as an unprotected child, and trust, the opposite of what the disciples are doing at this point in the story. Sound familiar? For me, one who grew up in a very difficult household, learning to trust and let go has been a long and winding journey called, my life.

The disciples have a long way to go on their journey. I have a long way to go on my journey. You may have a long way to go on your journey – in part, because we all resist the invitation to vulnerability and surrender. Too hard, yes, avoidable, always, deniable, not so easy, and alas for me often infuriatingly impossible. This is where a little self-compassion can go a long way. That is all part of the Good News, and to

quote a gifted song writer, David Wilcox, “In the big boring middle of your long book of life, after the twist has been told, if you don’t die in glory at the age of Christ, then your story is still coming true.”

All our stories are still coming true, and for me that too is the Good News. Do not get distracted by focusing on getting it right. Step back, come back, and continue on your (our) journey, our story. That is the key. That is what Jesus is trying to teach the disciples, and us. It is that simple ... and it is that hard. However, the fact that our stories are coming true together, as a community, means for me that we have a way forward to deal with our own versions of doubt and resistance and for that, I am reminded, yet again, to be grateful.