

It just really seems like the disciples aren't paying attention at all, doesn't it? It's almost like they can't even see themselves, can't see the total irony in the situation. Here's Jesus teaching about his own suffering and death, and then there's them, arguing about which one is the greatest.

There's a good reason we get this story back-to-back with the one we read last week, the story of Peter first confessing Jesus as the Messiah, and then getting chewed out for setting his mind "not on divine things, but on human things." Mark wants us to see the irony. He wants us to see the obvious dissonance that the disciples are arguing about something so inane in the context of Jesus' prediction of his Passion. Even so, there's some context we're missing.

In between last week's story and this one, there are two others. First, immediately following Peter's confession, is the story of the Transfiguration. You may remember that this is when Jesus takes three disciples—Peter, James and John—up the mountain to see him appear with Moses and Elijah, the Great Lawgiver and the Great Prophet. The rest of the disciples he left behind.

While he was gone, they tried to heal a boy possessed by a demon, and the second story occurs when Jesus and his three star pupils come down from the mountain and have to finish the job the others failed to do. They are forced to ask Jesus, "Why were we unable to cast it out?" So, in these two stories, we begin to see a hierarchy: Jesus has his favorites and his failures. Is it any wonder how they got on the topic of who was better than whom?

But even in context, it is ironic, bookended by these two Passion predictions. In telling us these stories in this order, I think Mark wants us to put ourselves in the disciples' shoes and recognize the little ways that we do this, too, and to recognize the irony in ourselves. It might make us uncomfortable to hear it put so plainly, but if you think about it, this arguing over greatness is still something we all do, isn't it? We may not do it with arguments or words, but we do it with clothes, with cars, with houses, school districts. We do it with the food we choose to serve to guests and the way we present ourselves in public. We do it in a formal way with the way we evaluate one another in our schools and in our workplaces: some students are higher grade than others; some workers are worth more money than others.

Jesus' response to this argument is to flip the criteria being used to determine greatness. The disciples are trying to climb the social ladder, and so he takes somebody from the bottom—a child, with no status to confer—and puts them at the top. This is the wisdom from above, as James says, that is counter to the wisdom of the world. If you want to be greatest, be least; if you want to welcome God, welcome the lowliest child.

And you know what? That's a pretty good lesson to take from this. If you get nothing from this text besides "Treat lowly people like great people," that's just fine. I think we could all use an excuse to think about our own contexts and wonder who are the people we disregard or ignore or think less of, and what does it mean to welcome them like we would welcome Jesus himself.

But as I think of this story, I wonder if that's all we can get from it. Yes, it can help us to recognize those passions for worldly success within us that are warring with the passions for things like peace and justice and equity, and the disputes those passions cause, but simply flipping the ladder upside down still just encourages us to climb the ladder, just in the opposite direction. It's still a hierarchy. I'm more interested in what this story can teach us about Jesus.

What I notice in this story is that the disciples are arguing about who is greatest—who's highest in the pecking order—and that at the top of that order is where we typically imagine God. It only makes sense to try to climb that ladder if by climbing we are getting closer to God. It just so happens that we also get to compare ourselves with one another, perhaps to see how we're doing; to see if I'm closer to God than you are, or if you are closer than me. When Jesus points to the child—the person at the bottom of the ladder—and says that this is where he is, and where God is, I don't think he's just reversing the direction we want to climb.

Scholar Eugene Boring writes, "Just giving up things will not make one Christian; it will only make one empty. What is difficult for our culture to understand, indeed what it cannot understand on its own terms, is an orientation to one's life that is not focused on self at all, either as self-esteem or self-abasement, as self-fulfillment or self-emptying."ⁱ It seems to me that, in reading these stories, we've been thoroughly trained to read them in terms of ourselves: "what do I need to do," "how should I act," "what does God want from me?" Obviously, these are important things to think about—James' letter, along with all the letters in the Bible, are intended to help guide Christian communities in asking these very questions—but the story Mark is telling isn't about ourselves at all, it's about Jesus, the Son of Man, the Human One.

I can't help but notice the wordplay in this story: Jesus says, "The Human One will be handed over into human hands, and they will kill him." It makes me wonder if this is a story about how our constant focus on ourselves and what we need to do to become closer to God is actually leaving us empty, killing us, like we killed Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, isn't focused on himself all the time; he is the first Human One to break that cycle. I wonder if part of what Jesus is saying is that when these kind of questions are all we care about, we are destroying ourselves.

Jesus, in addition to identifying himself as the Human One, also identifies himself with the child. It bears remembering that the understanding of childhood in this story is much different from ours. In this culture, children were loved, but mostly unappreciated. It wasn't worth a person's time to "welcome" or show hospitality to a child because they couldn't reciprocate, they couldn't show hospitality in return. You'd never try to impress a child because it wouldn't get you anywhere. What does it mean for Jesus to identify himself like this? Are we to understand that welcoming Jesus doesn't actually get us anything? Not even salvation?

Or perhaps, by identifying himself both with the child and with all humanity, he's helping us to understand who we are—by showing us who he is. The disciples have just been arguing about who is the greatest: in other words, who has the most to commend them. Maybe Peter is the bravest, or John the smartest. Or maybe it's Judas who has the most money or Thomas who is the shrewdest. Or maybe it's good old Bartholomew who is the greatest because he does what he's told and never makes waves. No matter what, the whole argument is about what each of these people has or does or is that makes them great.

The child has none of that. The child depends on their parents for everything: food, clothing, shelter, education, affection, purpose, even identity. Everything that child has has been given them by someone else; they can't claim to be great in their own right by anything they've done or said or been. What if Jesus, the Son of God, recognizes that he, like this child, is not great. Maybe he sees that everything he is, everything he has, is not his, but God's. Maybe the image of God as parent is less about God as the Authority Figure at the top of the ladder, and more about God as the Giver of All Things, the one from whom we derive everything that we claim as our own: wealth, intellect, skill, bravery, even obedience. What if Jesus, by pointing to the child, is trying to show us who we are?

Thomas Merton writes, "At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak [God's] name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our Sonship [sic]."ⁱⁱ

The argument of the disciples is all about what they have, what they do, what they are: all the things they can offer. This is where they see God in themselves. But, according to Merton and,

I think, to Jesus, the place where God dwells in us is not what we have, but in what we do not have. If we want to see God, we need to let go of all those things with which we commend ourselves. God is present in our absolute poverty, in our utter dependence upon God and on another. It seems to me that, if this is true, this is the ultimate irony: not that we should want to know who is the greatest, but that we think there could even be a greatest when any greatness that we have is not our own to begin with.

So this is my wondering as I read this story: if God is not to be sought at the top or at the bottom of the hierarchies in which we find ourselves, where is God to be sought? Where will we see God, if not in the greatness of great people or in the humility of humble ones? If we wish to be closer to God, but cannot do so through climbing either up or down, what is left to us? Perhaps it is simply in this helpless state of not knowing that God is most present; and maybe that's what allows us to welcome even a child in the name of Jesus.

ⁱ Boring, "Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*. p 352

ⁱⁱ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. p 142