



Finding Our Way

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:30-37

If someone wants to know the way to my heart, it's simple. It's not food, much as I love food! It's not acclamation, much as I appreciate it. It's not money or gifts or material possessions, much as I enjoy nice things. No, the way to my heart is by caring about and for my children. No question. Nothing else comes close.

In this coming Sunday's Gospel Lesson, Jesus tells his disciples for the second time that he is going to be betrayed, suffer, die, and rise again. They don't understand, but they are afraid to ask him about it. Instead, they start arguing with each other about who's the greatest. After all, if you don't want to talk about what is really important and will actually make a difference in your lives, arguing about something else that seems important, but that demands nothing of you, requires no changes from you, is a great way to go.

"He asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent." They have no interest in talking with Jesus about this. Just his asking the question probably woke them up to how far from what was really important the topic of their conversation had been. This is so often true of us. We argue about all manner of issues while avoiding those that might actually demand something of us and lead to change in our lives and world. We allow certain issues to serve as our "identified patients," like a family that focuses all their attention on a particular child as the one with all the problems, so the parents don't have to deal with their own dysfunctional relationship.

Jesus, as is often the case, doesn't hit the dysfunction head-on. With stories, parables, and in this case, a child, Jesus opens avenues of communication that have the potential to circumvent the formidable defenses of his listeners. He speaks to the issue they've been arguing about, but takes them beyond it, back to the real issue they need to wrestle with. "'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcome me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.'"

You want to be great? Here's the way. You want to impress me and my Father in heaven? This is how. Do you want to know the way to the heart of God? Care about, care for, God's children. The verse, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," might be a better overarching verse to memorize this week, but I love the way Jesus gets so very practical and specific when he takes this child into his arms. Ultimately, following Jesus does not come down to good sentiments, pithy sentences, and wonderful abstract thoughts, but to practical, loving, caring actions.

I know this doesn't flesh out all the answers. But when we find ourselves swimming amidst the competing currents, values, and demands of our lives and world, this passage provides grounding and helps us regain our sense of direction. When the disciples get caught focusing on and arguing about secondary matters or worse, Jesus calls them back to the heart, God's heart, of the matter.

The prophet Micah put it this way, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Jesus communicates it through a little show and tell, "'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..." Whatever our situation, whatever the choices and challenges, know that love and kindness, especially for the least and littlest, will be, at least in part, the basis for the answers you seek.

Prayer:

God, whose heart is always compassion, teach us your way. Forgive my preoccupation with trying to make sure I am enough, good enough, loved enough, productive enough, great enough. Forgive me for not believing the truth of your love made so completely clear on the cross. Forgive me for not always being confident that I am precious in your sight. By your grace, enable me to believe it, to trust you and your love, and so to be freed to focus my attention on being an ambassador of your love to others. Whatever I do and say, may I do it all in the name of Jesus, and therefore in the name of love, giving thanks to you, God our Father, through him. Amen.

Something(s) to try:

- Go out of your way to smile and say hi to a child.
- If a child gets distracting in a worship service, pray for loving patience for yourself, pray for God's rich blessing and welcome for the child and parents, and go say hello with a smile afterward.
- Sponsor a child with Covenant Kids Congo, World Vision, or another relief agency helping children.
- Sign up to mentor a child at a nearby school.
- Start helping with Sunday School or another children's program at church.

Memory/Meditation Verse:

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcome not me but the one who sent me."

Mark 9:37

Other recommended readings for this week:

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm 54

Psalm 1

James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a