

Mark 9:33-37

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Title: This Isn't a Competition

To me, the whole of Mark chapter 9 was written for ministers, missionaries, Christian artists, and church workers... and anybody else who aspires to be a “professional Christian.” Now, having said that, most of you might be inclined to sit back and relax. “Oh good! He ain't talking to me! Pastor Morgan is gonna preach at himself for awhile!”

But the stakes that Jesus lays out are so high, the risks are so great, that anyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus had better take notice. Anyone who ever felt a longing to “do great things for God” needs to take Mark 9 seriously.

To see this way, it's probably easier to begin at the end. Starting at Mark 9:42, seemingly out of nowhere Jesus drops this bomb on his disciples:

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Jesus actually gets more graphic from there, but this warning is enough for us to work with. I read this and I think, “Whoa, Jesus! Where's all this coming from? What are you so worked up about?” And as I look back over the whole chapter, I sense how things have been building up to this holy blow up.

First is the Transfiguration story, which we looked at last week. Peter wants to build three monuments to commemorate the appearance of Jesus, Elijah, and Moses together. He wants to set up a new holy site that will rival the temple in Jerusalem itself – a new place for tourists I mean pilgrims to come and have their own mountain top experience. “Hey Jesus, good thing we came with you! We can draw up some plans! We'll put the three tabernacles up there, the gift shop over there, with lots of parking for the camels in back.”

Only God's voice straight from heaven interrupts this line of thinking.

Then, coming down from the mountain, Jesus finds that his other disciples are arguing with some scribes and making a scene. A man brought his demon-possessed son to them for an exorcism, but they couldn't do it. Jesus gets noticeably impatient: “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to

me.” (9:19) He heals the boy and his disciples want to know: Why couldn’t we pull it off? Jesus says, “This kind can only come out through prayer.” At the very least, Jesus is making it clear that ministry is not about knowing more than the scribes or having the right formulas or techniques. Prayer- that is, total reliance on God – is the only way this can be done.

Then we come to the text that is the focus of our attention this morning. Jesus knows what they’ve been up to. First they argue with the scribes, now they argue with each other. The fact that three of them saw the Transfiguration but the others didn’t probably only made things worse. They are jockeying for position. We’ll come back this scene in a minute.

Immediately after that, John comes to Jesus and says, “Hey I just saw a guy casting out demons in your name. We gotta tell him to knock that off, right? Your name is proprietary! We have trademarks! We need to sue him for copyright infringement!” John is getting ready to draft a cease-and-desist letter when Jesus tells him to back off.

Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. (9:40-41)

Then comes the millstone.

So I’d summarize Jesus’ lesson like this:

This is God’s kingdom work.

It isn’t your profession.

It isn’t a competition.

Competing, comparing, and complaining are what we tend to do, all day long, to the point that we don’t even realize we are doing it.

Jesus says to US, his disciples: If you treat this like a career, if you compete with one another, then you are going to cause one of these little one – the spiritual weak and struggling ones – to stumble, to miss the point, to lose of sight of the kingdom and what I’m really all about it. And I am telling you: You would be better off at the bottom of the ocean.

Jesus ain’t playing around.

To help you understand why I’m so passionate about this teaching, I need to tell you about my first call. *<describe how members of the church set me up to be in competition with the Senior Pastor and how God brought the millstone text to me before I did terrible damage.>*

While it is critically important that we hear and heed Jesus when he says that this isn’t a competition and heaven help you if make it one, we need more help than that. We need a positive action that we can focus on instead of avoiding the negative action. That’s why I want to come back to that moment on the road when Jesus asks them what they’ve been arguing about. Jesus literally sits them down and says:

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Then he apparently has a little kid handy, so he scoops the child up in his arms and says,

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

The profound spiritual truth Jesus put before us is this:

The lower you stoop, the closer you get to God.

That’s a pretty great insight. That would be enough, just on its own.

But there is also a mind-blowing, paradigm shifting truth about the wathat Jesus offers us:

Core

Any person and every person can serve, can include, can receive.

To them, the gates of God’s kingdom swing wide open.

If you aspire to be like Jesus, then you will aspire to be a servant. Nothing can keep you from this. No one has the power to keep this from you! Well, except yourself!

Let me explain this a little differently:

If I want to be first, be the best, be on top, the world says I need to fight for it. I gotta earn it. I need to make it happen. And if I pursue this, my only chance at winning comes at the expense of others. If I succeed, I may feel powerful. But Jesus is teaching us that this kind of power is an illusion.

I may believe that being a leader makes me powerful. But unless other people follow me, I’m just a guy taking a walk. My aspiration to be on top is dependent on others.

If I try to keep someone out, instead of including them, then I may feel powerful until someone else in my group decides to do the welcoming.

And I may feel powerful when I take something I want. But if instead of I can learn how to never take but only receive, then my heart is truly free.

If I demand to be served, I may feel powerful, but only if someone acquiesces to my demand. The person who chooses to serve me is the one with the real power.

For those of us who have heard Jesus’ story many times, this idea may remind of us of key moments in Jesus’ life and teaching.

- We remember the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus essentially says “Blessed are those who this world calls losers. They are on heaven’s doorstep!”
- We remember Jesus saying that the last shall be first and the first shall be last (Matt 20:16).
- We remember when Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd and said, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own free will” (John 10)...
- And of course We remember Jesus at the Last Supper, washing his disciples feet (John 13).
- Jesus didn’t just teach this once in Mark 9. He lived it.

And he calls us to live it too.

Our call:

**Ask God to show you this week when you are competing, comparing, or complaining.
Interrupt that with serving action and a welcoming spirit.**