

“Signs of the Times”
Mark 9:30-37
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Mark 9:30-37 (NRSVUE)

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 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.

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, and for the word of God within us: **Thanks be to God.**

Some say that you really have to travel with someone in order to know who they really are. In fact, people discerning long-term commitment often consider the question of if their travel styles are compatible. Luckily, Scotty and I found that our travel styles are compatible, and that each of us is gifted in particular ways to deal with the various things that will inevitably happen during a vacation. Over the years, between Nashville and Seattle and Italy and many places in between, we have gotten to know each other well on our travels.

As the disciples traveled with Jesus, they witnessed him teaching and preaching, healing bodies and restoring relationships. And as they traveled, the gospel of Mark says that Jesus was telling the disciples who he was and what he was doing. But the disciples did not understand, and they were afraid to ask him what he really meant.

So instead, as they walked, the disciples argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Later in Mark’s gospel, the brothers James and John come to Jesus and ask if they will be able to sit at his side in Jesus’ kingdom. In both stories, Jesus lets the disciples know that they are asking the wrong questions. They are focused on the wrong thing.

Amy G. Oden, a professor of church history, writes in a commentary on this passage:

“So why don’t the disciples simply ask Jesus to explain? Probably because they don’t want to appear as confused as they are. Or, their distress at his teaching is so deep they

fear addressing it. Besides, the closer we are to Jesus, the more we are supposed to know (about God, about prayer, about the Bible, about religious stuff), right?

In our own time, no one wants to look uninformed, confused, or clueless. We withhold our toughest questions, often within our own churches and within Christian fellowship. We pretend we don't have hard questions. Yet the deepest mysteries of life do indeed elude us. Why do good people suffer? Why are humans so brutal to one another? Why does evil succeed? If God's own Son is betrayed and killed, then no one is safe. Why did God set up a world like this?

Why ask our hard questions? Because we withhold these questions at our own peril.

Verse 34 reveals what happens to the disciples when they sidestep the real questions they are afraid to ask — they turn to arguing with each other, squabbling among themselves over petty issues of rank and status (verse 34). There is a direct line drawn from verse 32 to verse 34. When the disciples avoid asking hard questions, they focus on posturing about who is right.”¹

Though they are fully aware that they don't understand Jesus, they are *more concerned about being right than making it right*. They are afraid to ask questions, afraid to entertain the fact that they don't know everything. Their fragility leads them into insecurity about their status in the eyes of their leader. I wonder if they are afraid that they will have to confront the reality of their humanity, including human fallibility.

Again and again, the disciples show us their relatability in how they are hopelessly, messily, profoundly human. Because we do all these things, too.

Sometimes we are afraid—of embarrassment, of being shamed, of being wrong, of looking stupid, of being called out, of being called *in*. Sometimes we give in to the temptation to be petty, to focus on some low-hanging fruit because the things we actually need to address are so hard. Sometimes we wonder about our own status, thinking higher of ourselves than we should and showing arrogance and condescension when someone dares question us. Sometimes we resist submitting ourselves and our questions to God, for fear of where following God's call and receiving answers to our questions will lead us. Sometimes we are more concerned with being right than making a situation right.

I could sum all this up by saying simply this: sometimes we are reminded of our own human fragility, and we feel deeply unsettled.

But we, like the disciples, often need God to refocus us, to shift our priorities, to remind us of who and what we are committed to.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-mark-930-37-2>

This past week, Pastor Leigh and I traveled to Montgomery, Alabama to attend a program hosted by the Alliance of Baptists entitled “Excavating Our Roots.” During this program, we listened to a womanist theologian lecture about the nature of true solidarity. We experienced the Equal Justice Initiative Museum, set up to trace the impacts of white supremacy on Black people and people of color, from the eradication of indigenous peoples on this continent through the enslavement period, Civil War, Reconstruction and Jim Crow to modern mass incarceration. We saw Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr served as pastor. We visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, also known as the lynching memorial, where hundreds of iron columns hang in the air, engraved with the names and dates of people lynched in each county where there are records kept.

It was a profound experience that I will be processing for a long while. Some of the feelings and thoughts that came up for me were these: grief. The incalculable loss. Anger. Hopelessness. How criminal justice lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson said, “Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.” Guilt. Shame. “Why didn’t I know this?” and then “How would I know, since whiteness is so adept at snuffing out the truth?” I learned facts and figures about Reconstruction-era lynchings that I had no idea about previously, including that a man was lynched near my hometown, in Michigan, in 1867. I learned the heartbreaking statistic that 1 in 3 Black boys born today will spend time in prison. I read poetry written by a man held on death row since he was a teenager for a crime they’ve since found evidence to disprove his coerced guilty plea.

And I was reminded of my own humanity, and my white fragility, and I, like the disciples, felt deeply unsettled.

But I also learned about community reparations being made to Black communities all over this country. I learned about the resistance of abolitionists, the safehouses, the freedom fighters, the way-makers who led with song and story toward freedom. I felt honored to bear witness, to learn people’s stories. I felt humbled, as I was in the presence of sacred stories of individual and collective perseverance and resistance and celebration. I felt hope. Solidarity. Joy. Community.

And in those moments, I realized that God was reorienting my priorities. God was reminding me, and reminding all who gathered, of who we are and of what we are committed to.

As I was slowly walking through exhibits, I wondered, “what if my ancestors were part of the evil of enslavement and human trafficking? What does that mean for me, and my life, and my faith?” And then I realized that was the wrong question. The question I needed to be asking was, “regardless of what my ancestors may or may not have done to denigrate the dignity of fellow humans, how can I be a part of making sure all people can live with dignity today?”

In our reflections on our experiences at the Equal Justice Initiative and the memorial, our group wrestled with the question that folks in many white liberal spaces often ask: “what would I have done, if I lived “back then”?” meaning in the time of colonization of this land, during the periods of enslavement, Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights Movement, etc. (*and of course, we must note that some of these times are not over even now!*) We knew there were people of all races who took action during these times. But we also recognized that there must have been people around at the time who saw all these things happening around them, and, like

the disciples, decided not to ask questions. Like the disciples, they chose ignorance. Like the disciples, they asked the wrong questions because they were focused on trivial things.

And we recognized in ourselves, and in our group reflection, that there are probably things that we are not noting as signs of our times, that we are willfully ignoring, that we are looking past so that we can focus on something more palatable.

Pop star Harry Styles has a song called “Sign of the Times,” that offers this poignant message:

“We never learn, we've been here before
Why are we always stuck and running from
Your bullets, the bullets?
We never learn, we've been here before
Why are we always stuck and running from
Your bullets, your bullets? ...
We don't talk enough
We should open up
Before it's all too much
Will we ever learn?
We've been here before
It's just what we know...”

But if we return to the scripture, we see Jesus gently and generously reorient the disciples. Knowing that they had been arguing amongst themselves, and probably being very aware of their confusion at what important work was at stake, Jesus refocused them. He showed them which signs were important to watch for in the times in which they were living.

The text says,

“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, I see Jesus saying, “I know you’re worried about your status, about how people look at you and what they think of you. I know you’re confused, and you’re having a lot of feelings about what you’re doing in this place, and why and how you came to be here. Let me show you what you really need to be watching for. Look for moments of humility, and humble people serving one another out of love, expecting nothing in return. Look for those who welcome children—actually, look for children themselves, watch and learn how they are. When you pay attention to the youngest among us, you can learn about how to follow me, that is, with an open heart and curious mind. And when you follow me, you are close to the Sacred Love that created and is creating still...and you can see the signs of our times, that God is near to each of us in our moments of need, that God will show us the way toward just living, that the key to all of this is love.”

So, friends, pay attention. Don't bury your head in the sand. Stay engaged, stay aware, stay woke.

What is happening around us that we'd rather not think about? That we'd rather not see, or hear, or feel? How are we permitting ourselves to focus on the surface matter, the easy talking point, instead of doing the work of excavating the meaning behind the signs?

Beloved church—because you are beloved, and you should never forget it—you may be human. You may be fallible. You may make mistakes sometimes. You may unwittingly, or even knowingly, participate in harm at some point. So have I, so will I. So has this church, and so will this church. Because we are hopelessly, messily, profoundly human. None of that changes your beloved-ness.

And, none of that changes our obligation to submit ourselves and our questions to the Holy, in the hope and sureness that they will refocus and reorient us towards what is just, and true, and good.

The signs of our times are out there. And in here. What will you do once you see them?

Amen.