

**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**  
**These Are My Kind of People!**

Mark 9:30 – 37

He was on a break from seminary, visiting his dad's congregation in Minnesota. He was a young man, and had learned a lot in seminary. He was ready to jump in and take on his first call. But it wasn't time yet, so he decided to put his training into practice at his dad's church. He felt like the pope – shaking hands, making nice, kissing babies...

But when he returned home with his parents, he said with disgust, "Some of those men had *alcohol* on their breath. I don't know if I would feel too good about having alcoholics in *my* congregation." My grandpa shot my dad a *piercing* glare, and said, "These are *my* kind of people!" My dad knew never to cross *that* line again!

As I contemplate our Gospel lesson for today, I wonder how similarly Jesus' disciples felt when Jesus brought a child into their midst. Let's get into it!

In Mark 9, Jesus wants time alone to teach his disciples. He knows that it won't be long until they reach Jerusalem, where his passion will take place. He will be delivered into the hands of men, and he will die and on the third day rise again. He has already tried to tell his disciples this, but Peter rebuked him, and refused to accept Jesus' message. So, Jesus tries again. And what is their response? Verse 32 says, "But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."

*Man, how dense can they be?! This is the second time he's told them about his passion, and they still don't get it. On top of that, they're afraid to ask so that they might get it!*

But in fact, it's *not* uncommon to hold back because of fear. We subconsciously believe that we won't survive the answer, or don't want to feel responsible to respond to the answer we receive. We're not yet ready, but maybe one day we *will* be. When we're a little older, a little more confident, a little more able to hear whatever answer they give us, we will ask the question. But right now, we're not ready...yet.

So what *is* it that they are afraid to hear? Maybe that their hopes of the Messiah will not play out how Jesus intends to, that they are not following who they *thought* they were following? Maybe they are afraid of their theology imploding – if Jesus really *is* God's Son, and he chooses a path of suffering, what does that mean about God? And what does that mean for them, as Jesus' followers? Does that mean that they will suffer and die like him? Maybe you have some other guesses too. Reading Mark, we don't know *why* they don't press, but we know they are afraid.

And maybe it's *because* they're afraid and want to pretend that Jesus *hasn't* just said what he's said, that they argue over who's the greatest. Jesus walks ahead of them, so they argue amongst one another.

They arrive at Capernaum, which is Peter's hometown, and where many scholars believe Jesus has his home base for ministry. They're in familiar territory, and likely recognize some of the people around them.

Jesus sits down to teach them, and proceeds to ask what they were arguing about. They don't answer. But Jesus clearly *knows*, because in his next breath, he instructs them that

whoever wants to be the greatest, must be the very last, and servant of all (Mk 9:35). To attain a position of consequence, one must be at the bottom, the servant of all.

Then Jesus gives them an image that they *won't* be able to forget. He brings a child into their circle, and *hugs* the child.

Before we fawn over this picture, there's something you and I need to understand. Our culture is *quite* a bit different from Jesus'. If you or I hug a child, it communicates that we are kind and thoughtful – good people, really. If children come up to *us* to give us hugs, it is a more powerful indication, that we are sensitive and safe people to be around. It's a *good* thing to be good with kids.

But Jesus' embrace of a child meant something quite a bit different in his culture. It *wasn't* an honorable thing to be good with kids. Children had no "status or prestige."<sup>1</sup> The image of Jesus embracing a little child, was not *meant* to be a sweet image. It was instead a *shocking* communication that Jesus made himself *equal* to this child; Jesus chose to become the *least*, just like this child.

Because our conceptions of children are different, if Jesus were to teach you and me his lesson from Mark 9, he would choose a *different* kind of person to be the example. This person would be someone whose company many would be *embarrassed* to keep. It would be someone who *couldn't* make you look good. It would be someone you might fear would *completely* discredit you and *ruin* your reputation. You probably have a picture of this person in your mind. *This* is the kind of person that Jesus would embrace in his arms and say, "Whoever welcomes [this person] in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mk 9:37).

Jesus doesn't pull any punches. To be *great* in the kingdom of God is to befriend and welcome the ones at the *bottom*, the *most unlovable* ones. To be first is to become the last, and the servant of all.

Is it any wonder that it's difficult to see God? Everything in us wants to look up, to look for glory and power and magnificence. We don't *want* to look down, and we especially don't want to *be down*, where the shameful things of the world reside. As Lutherans, we call this the theology of glory versus the theology of the cross. We want to look *up*, but Jesus is revealed in the broken and shameful.

Is it any wonder that the ones with the most abiding and attractive faith are the ones who have endured the greatest pain? In Matthew 5, Jesus calls them "blessed" – the ones poor in spirit; the ones who mourn; the meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and when insulted, persecuted, and have false accusations against them (Matt 5:3 – 10).

*This* is why it is so difficult to see God. You and I don't *want* to look in the places God chooses to reveal Himself; we want to look in the places of *glory*. This is why Jesus uses the metaphor of the child; he chooses "the foolish things of this world to shame the wise; God [chooses] the weak things of this world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27).

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 124.

Lutheran theologian, Marva Dawn, composed an entire study on this topic in her book, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*. She writes, “The goal is for our power to come to its end,”<sup>2</sup> because “God’s power [comes] to dwell with us in our weakness.”<sup>3</sup> “Even as Christ accomplished atonement for us by suffering and death, so the Lord accomplishes witness to the world through our weakness. In fact, God has more need of our weakness than of our strength.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s terrifying. And unattractive. The goal is to come to the end of ourselves – the end of our power, hubris, abilities, accomplishments, reputation – *all* of it. So that Christ may dwell in us. Because Christ *dwells* in weakness. As the apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). When you and I come to the end of ourselves, *that* is where Christ begins.

Many of you have heard me speak about my friend, Sarah. Sarah was the youth director at the Presbyterian Church next door, but people could have *sworn* that we worked at the same church. We created ministries together and took care of each other’s youth when we needed a hand. I loved Sarah, but it wasn’t until she died that I realized that my understanding of her had been very limited.

A little over two years ago, Sarah had given birth to a little girl. And a couple of weeks later, died. To this day, I don’t know the cause of her death.

At her service, I had the incredible privilege to share about our friendship. I looked through old cards and recalled the years of our friendship to collect my thoughts, and as I did that, a realization dawned on me. I had never known how much she loved me while she was alive. I don’t know if I have ever loved a friend like she loved me.

Then came time for her service. That Presbyterian church was *packed*. And it wasn’t packed because she died too young. It was packed because each person there *loved* Sarah, and had been loved *by* her. It was incredible! I had never before seen people who were more *unlike* one another at a memorial service. There were people of all different ages, social classes, colors, creeds, languages, genders, and sexual orientations. I couldn’t believe it. How could all of these *different* kinds of people love, and have been loved by, the same person?

I don’t know if I ever *will* see something quite like that gathering. It was humbling, and an incredible manifestation of the love of God. *No one* was out of place; *everyone* knew they were welcome and were *supposed* to be there. These were *her* kind of people, and *no one* was at the bottom!

Our friend, Allyson, said that she remembered this. And she told me, “Sarah openly loved. She especially seemed to have a love for those with less, those who struggled.”

As you and I follow in the way of Jesus, this path called “discipleship,” we will be called to look down, to come to the end of ourselves. Because it is at the end of ourselves that Christ

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<sup>2</sup> Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Dawn, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Dawn, 47.

dwells. And it is where Christ dwells, that *no one* is at the bottom, and those once thought of as lowly are instead given a place of honor.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph 4:20 – 21).