

James 3:13- 4:3, 7-8a ~ Mark 9:30-37

What Were You Arguing About?

September 23, 2018 ~ 18th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction to Text

Mark is a masterful storyteller. Each chapter is artfully connected and builds on what came before. You may recall the highlights of last week's Mark reading.

1. Peter's A+, right answer, when he confesses: "You are the Messiah!"
2. Jesus' first passion prediction, that he would be rejected, would suffer, be killed and 3 days later rise again.
3. Jesus' Three point call to discipleship: Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.

Just before today's text two other events have occurred that play into our story:

1. The Transfiguration, where Jesus' power and glory are revealed on the mountain, with the voice of God booming, "This is my Son the Beloved, Listen to him!"
2. Disciples are unable to heal a boy with epilepsy, then Jesus come and does healing of the boy for them.

Today's story is a teaching moment: but this is the kind that occurs right after you realize you've lost your class. Listen to how Jesus takes and turns their thick headedness into a teaching opportunity. Let this lesson open the way for our thick headedness, today as we listen to Mark 9: 30-37.

Sermon

Once there was a little boy named Howard. For his sixth birthday he received a goldfish he named Harvey. Howard watched Harvey swim after school every afternoon and he noticed that Harvey always swam around his bowl in the same direction, on the same path, at the same speed—an inch inside the rim of the bowl, an inch below the surface of the water, round and round like the second hand on a clock. If he stirred the water or pinched a little food down into the water, Harvey would follow a different trail for less than a minute, then he would go back to his predictable, boring pattern.

Like all goldfish bowls will do, it turned cloudy. So Grandma said, "It's time to change the water." She was going to use a net and put Harvey in a spaghetti pot while they changed out the water. But Howard had a better idea: "Let's put Harvey in the bath tub! He could swim from one end to the other, up and down, from the top surface water, down to the bottom, "He'll have a terrific time, Grandma!" So Grandma went along with this idea. They went upstairs, filled the bath tub, then Howard lowered him in, "C'mon Harvey, this is your chance!"

Stunned, he lay there for a moment, then perked up. "OK, now for some real exploring," thought Howard. But the child was disappointed and amazed by what he saw: Harvey began to swim in a circle about 10" across, an inch below the surface, like the second hand of a clock—just like he did in his bowl!

I have just told this true story because Harvey's choice to keep swimming in tight circles as if he were still in the 10 inch fish bowl, when given the ocean of a tub to swim in, reminds me of the disciples' choice, to argue amongst themselves, the same old arguments, still holding onto their same old understanding of power and greatness they had before they ever left their nets and started following Jesus. Still they were swimming in circles, maybe even more vigorously now that they were scared and confused by Jesus' prediction of his death on a cross, and their failure to heal the boy with epilepsy.

So Jesus turns and asks them, "What were you arguing about?" Of course *he* knew what they were arguing about. He knew they were arguing with one another about who was the greatest. Jesus' question was really for them. The question was to help them discover the truth that God had for them just under the surface noise of their chatter. It's a good one for us to ask ourselves when we begin to argue. What are we really arguing about? My mother-in-law, who was an extraordinarily perceptive, let's get past the surface talk, psychotherapist taught me, that when couples argue about money. What couple doesn't? Money is not the real argument. There's something *else* that's driving that argument. I wonder if the same is true when we argue about politics, or supreme court justice nomination hearings: What are we really arguing about?

Jesus' question to the disciples, sounds like God's question to Adam when he and Eve were hiding from God in the Garden of Eden, "Where are you?" Adam's answer sounds a little like the disciples. "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid." (Genesis 3:10) If you think about it, both are kind of funny—the idea that Adam and Eve could hide from God. Or that the disciples would be arguing about who was the greatest, right after Jesus has told them not once but twice, that he was about to be betrayed, and killed, and would rise again. It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic. It would be funny if it wasn't so true to our nature. "Where are you, Adam? What were you arguing about, disciples?" These questions were for them, and for us. Questions that could free them and us from the fishbowl syndrome of going round and round in the same direction, same arguments, same fears, same hostilities, same grab for power in every sphere of our lives.

Jesus says again what he has said before: "Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all." No, we don't like that. So we pretend we don't get it. "Show us what you mean, Jesus." And so he did. He saw a child near them and placed it in his arms, for all to see. An object lesson in a child: Vulnerable, dependent, needy. And then he said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." I hear echoes of this moment in the Matthew 25 parable Jesus tells about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, is feeding and clothing Jesus. Jesus' lesson is clear, consistent, not difficult to understand. And yet, we keep arguing, we keep trying to be the greatest, as if Jesus never taught us, lived for us, died for us, and was raised from the dead for us, that we might do otherwise, that we might learn to love and serve the least of these.

This past week, we laid to rest not one, but two members of our FPC faith community, Lorraine Regel, who became a member in 1934 and Kristi Huebschen who became a member in 2007. In preparing for Lorraine's service on Wednesday, and Kristi's service on Saturday, I had the opportunity to hear stories about their lives from their nearest of kin and close friends. With their beautiful lives and stories fresh in my mind and heart as I considered today's text, I could see the truth of Jesus' teaching about greatness reflected in the stories that bubbled up about Lorraine and Kristi. There were many, and I will share only two. Lorraine and her husband of over 50 years were not able to have children of their own and so they chose to love and support, cherish and play with their nieces and nephews and neighbor children, as if they were their own. Janet Singer was one of those neighbor children who came to her funeral and shared this with Janet and me. A great niece spoke at her service about the game her Aunt had at the door waiting, every time she came over Lorraine was ready to play, and as they played this child would share her heart with her Aunt, who took the time to listen, to welcome her and all children who came near. Yes, she was welcoming Jesus every time she and her husband, Merlin, did this.

The second story that tells us again what really matters, with all that we do, all that we argue about, and twisted in knots over, was the one told by Jennifer Wierzbicki at Kristi's service. Jennifer will always remember that when she was first diagnosed with MS and homebound, laid low as never before, Kristi Huebschen and Gerri Toyama were the first that came over to bring Jennifer and Ryan and their family a meal. A small act of compassion it would seem, but huge in the eyes of Jennifer in her moment of need, and of God.

What are you arguing about? We have N.O.W. (Nutrition on Weekends) lunches to pack for over 400 children here in the Marshfield area every weekend. When we do this, we are feeding Jesus. And as we do, we should be asking each other, "why are they hungry?" That would be a more useful conversation than arguing around the edges. What are you arguing about? We have our CROP walk next Sunday to raise funds and walk to fight against global hunger in a world where hunger is not a supply problem, but a distribution problem. Let's talk about that. What are you arguing about? We still have over 400 immigrant children separated from their parents here in the U.S. How can we help reunite them? Let's talk about that.

Do you want to be a greater church? Do you want to be a greater nation, a greater world in God's eyes? Jesus says if we welcome the child, we welcome him. Find the children at the back of the line and help them. Let's stop swimming in circles just below the surface and go deeper and wider. Let's dive into God's ocean of mercy and love with all we've got to give.

ⁱ Howard D. Friend, *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the Inside Out*, (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA 1998).