



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — SEPTEMBER 23, 2018  
WISDOM OF SOLOMON 1:16-2:1, 12-22; PSALM 54; JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8A; MARK 9:30-37

## WHO'S THE GREATEST?

**MARK 9:30-37** [*Jesus and his disciples 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."]*

- "You know, when Jesus comes into his Kingdom, someone's going to have to run things. Obviously, it'll be me. I'm the rock; I'm the one he relies on most."
- "No way, Peter. You always put your foot in it. Wasn't it just last week Jesus yelled 'Get behind me, Satan' at you?"
- "Oh, so it should be YOU, James? Or your brother John? The hotheaded "Sons of Thunder" would make good leaders?"
- "Heey, Jesus is the only one who gets to call us that without getting a fat lip!"
- "Anyway! All of you! I know what it's like to be in the thick of fighting for political change! I am in a better position to lead!"
- "And you're a known Zealot, Simon, and you already have too many people against you!"
- "Oh, and people like *you*, Thomas, with your constant sarcasm?"

**"Hey! What were you guys arguing about?"  
... as if Jesus didn't know.**

Is Jesus shaking his head at this point, thoroughly disheartened? He has just told them again – the second time in Mark's

Gospel that he's tried to get their attention to this – that he is going to suffer and die! And they still don't get it! They've still got a conquering Messiah and power on their minds.

But it's not just that they don't get it: they **KNEW** they didn't get it, and it was scary, and they were afraid to ask him. It's a hard thing to ask about. What do you mean you're going to die? So, they avoid the tough question. Let's stick with RISE. We understand RISE. When you RISE to power, you're going to need a right-hand man. Now **THAT**, we understand. So, who's the greatest?

Sometimes we leave the tough questions out – we ignore them – and go to what we understand instead of what's hard. But most of the important stuff **IS** hard, isn't it?

And what Jesus is teaching his disciples is hard, important stuff. And he has chosen **them**; he knows **these** are the people who are going to have to be carrying on his message when he goes. They **need** to understand. But here they are arguing about the exact opposite of what he's teaching them and showing them. It must frustrate Jesus to be living out, time and again, that his power is a different kind of power, that his new kingdom is about drawing in all of us, reversing power structures and raising up the lowly, professing God's love and how we have to live that kind of love – to a bunch of people that just don't seem to want to get it at all.

Well, it's easier to avoid what we can't figure out, avoid what scares us. Lots of us put

things off, right? *You know who you are...* I myself come from a family of avoiders. The car is making a funny noise? I should get that checked. I hope it isn't going to be a thousand-dollar repair; that would be scary. Yeah, I'll get that checked soon.... And it ends up I'll get it checked the day the car finally won't start at all and I have to call Triple A. *(Please God, don't let that be today in front of all these people in the St. Mark's parking lot.)*

But there are bigger things we avoid, too, right? There are moral dilemmas in how we live in this divided society, how we live into our responsibility as Christians. We may find ourselves doing what the disciples did – avoiding the scary thing we don't understand – that our Lord lived into suffering and death to show us how just how much we are called to care for each other – and instead we focus on what is familiar.

And what's familiar is this culture of jockeying for position – the same thing that was familiar to the disciples, who were bickering on this road, where, in Mark's telling, Jesus is travelling away from his renown as teacher and miracle worker and heading through the back roads toward danger, with urgency in his teaching the disciples.

But they're afraid to ask Jesus what this sacrifice he's talking about means. And, really, who can blame them? They're walking beside him on this road, after all; maybe

they're afraid of what Jesus might ask them to do.

*Are you afraid of what Jesus might ask you to do?* It's a big question. I think it's as big a question for us as it was for the disciples on the road with him.

**Am** I afraid of what Jesus might ask me to do? When living into the question, I have to admit that I have been at times afraid of, and continue to struggle with, the sacrifices Jesus might ask of me, if I really focus on following him with my whole heart. I might have to give more – more of my time, more of my own money, more of my attention, more of my autonomy. It is uncomfortable to try to humbly and authentically live into being last instead of striving to be first, best, most, closest, favorite.

And yet... the Spirit continually beckons to us to something deeper.

We know this and live this tension. There are the societal implications. We want people to have food and shelter and healthcare and safety and dignity – that's simple enough as priorities for living together in a decent society – but we also want sensible fiscal policies, so it's not easy to make it happen, not easy for me to share and maybe support paying more taxes or welcoming the stranger, especially when culture teaches an off-kilter idea of freedom that means I do mine and you do yours.

And there are personal implications. I am a creature of my culture, too. I fill my time to the brim with busy, important things, so that

I can be proud of myself and get a lot done, good things, and feel accomplished. Yet when Jesus calls me to *relationship*, **that's** how I get closer to Him – and relationship takes spending time together, finding quiet time with Jesus in prayer and spiritual practice alongside the lived-out action of being a Christian.

Why am I afraid of that? Well, who knows what I might hear in that quiet, right? It could be scary in there. Jesus wasn't preaching accomplishment. He was preaching be like a child. And whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. That's not how we roll. And, frankly, being the servant of all doesn't sound like the most fun thing to be, either. Jesus will ask that of me.

So, like the disciples in today's Gospel, we avoid digging in there with Jesus. And the letter of James that we read today names it: *"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"*

YES, THEY DO. The cravings at war within us are the craving to listen to culture and be about the self, to make myself and mine FIRST – pushing against the true self, the spark of the divine in each of us, that yearns to move closer and closer to recognizing our connection, to being filled not with worldly glory and goods, but with the love of Jesus. Which is always already there – but we're often too busy bickering about who's going to be the greatest to see it.

But today, as in every age, WE are the disciples who need to understand, to not avoid. Jesus has given to US to be the people who have to be carrying on his message. We NEED to understand.

The brilliant writer Annie Dillard called out: *“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us...and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.”*<sup>1</sup>

Is Jesus going to ask you something hard, even if you're not the greatest? Yes! He's

going to ask you to trust in Him, to live with the questions and ambiguities and still believe, to love with your whole heart, and to love your neighbor out loud in a culture of me-and-mine first. He's going to ask you to **not** distract yourself from the hard questions of Christian servanthood, the questions that come in living a Christ-centered life, but to open your heart and move closer.

He will ask you to transform your life, and in making yourself least, find fullness of joy beside him. Let us revel in recognizing that being God's beloved *child* is what makes each and every one of us most and best – including you.

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<sup>1</sup>Annie Dillard, “Holy the Firm (excerpt),” in *Cries of the Spirit*, ed. Marilyn Sewell (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 175.



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