

Remedial Discipleship

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Mark 9:30-37

Last week, my granddaughter Ava told me all about her first week in first grade. Her eyes sparkled as she told about her teacher, her classmates, and just how you line up in the morning to go into the classroom. Whatever you do every day, I hope you are half as excited about it as Ava is about her job of being a first grader.

The curriculum in the school of Christian discipleship in which we are enrolled is meant to bring us joy. In Jesus' school there are few recess periods or holidays, but apparently there are a lot of remedial lessons. You read the gospels and sometimes you think that Jesus' disciples are maybe not the sharpest pencils in the box. It looks like Jesus has to tell them the same things over and over again. What incredibly slow learners, I think. But then I remember—oh, yes, he's talking to me, too. Maybe I'm so quick on the uptake, either.

On the occasion Mark describes, Jesus breaks with his usual practice of teaching while they walk from place to place and he brings his disciples to Capernaum—"Nahum's Town"—over on the eastern shores of the lake. They all go in a house, where Jesus sits down--the traditional posture of a Jewish teacher.

Then he asks them a question, "So, what are you guys talking about?" What happens is like a schoolroom when the teacher steps out for a few minutes. You've been there: the students' chatter fills the room with energy, then suddenly, he comes back and it goes dead quiet. Eugene Peterson translates this line (*The Message*) "the silence is deafening." Jesus has been trying for a while now to tell his students about his impending death and resurrection, a lesson they really don't want to hear, so how can they possibly admit what they were talking about: their own glory.

Of course, we're no different. Jesus wants to talk about sacrifice and we'd rather talk about glory. Jesus keeps on presenting us with his alternate version of reality, and we say, "Uh-huh, I hear you, Lord, but don't be naïve--this is how the world works." We try to straddle two completely opposite value systems. And we wonder why we're so tired in the morning.

Jesus is a good teacher, though, and he's persistent. He knows that he needs to present the lesson more than one way to make it stick. He doesn't have PowerPoint in his classroom, but he does something even better: he snags a child and puts her in the middle of the class.

This is a completely weird move, and unfortunately its strangeness is lost on us. The motto, "Women and children first into the lifeboats," hadn't been invented in first century Palestine. Women were close to the bottom rung in the Mediterranean world, and children were even lower. Even in the middle ages, more than a thousand years after the time of Jesus, Thomas Aquinas taught that "in a raging fire, a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child" (*The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*).

So when Jesus puts a child in the midst of those big, tough men, we shouldn't think how tender and sweet it is that Jesus loves children—we should think how upsetting and provocative it is. Jesus is saying to these guys who are climbing all over each other for preferential treatment when the Big Show comes to town, "If you want to understand citizenship in the Realm of God, put yourself in the shoes of the least valued person."

The child as undervalued person doesn't fit for us in this lesson, though, does it? Or maybe it does. We may adore our children and our grandchildren. But we don't have to look far to see that children are still among the least valued and most neglected members of society, even in 21st century America. According to the Children's Defense Fund, our country lags behind almost every other industrialized nation on key indicators of child welfare. In the United States today, 5.8 million children live in extreme poverty and almost 9 million are without health insurance. More than 2.5 million grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Two-thirds of 4th graders in public schools cannot read at grade level, and 6 out of 10 can't

do math at grade level. As we worry about the quality of what goes on in our children's classrooms, many children don't have any classrooms to return to; 115 million children in the world do not go to school at all. Most of them are girls.

Any way you look at it, children are still among the least powerful and the least valued citizens of the earth. So the example Jesus uses with the disciples should still have the power to shock us. Our advocacy of justice and peace on earth has to be grounded in a recognition of the needs of children and a willingness to do something about them.

Some of you may have heard of the work Greg Mortenson is doing in central Asia. The story of how he came to undertake his extraordinary mission moves from personal ambition to humility and becomes a commitment to the basic needs of forgotten children. In other words, it shows what Jesus was talking about.

Greg Mortenson was literally trying to rise up in the world by climbing K2, the second highest mountain on the planet. He was a nurse by profession, but mountain climbing was his passion. He and his party spent 70 days on the mountain before they broke off their ascent short of the summit to rescue another climber. By the time that difficult and dangerous undertaking was over, Mortenson was exhausted, disoriented, separated from his party--and lost. Eventually he found himself in a remote mountain village in Pakistan.

While he was convalescing in that village, he noticed the children scratching their lessons in the dirt with a stick. There was no school there and the village was so poor, they couldn't afford the dollar a day to pay a teacher. So Greg Mortenson impulsively made a promise: he would build the village a school.

The epic of his efforts to raise the funds and overcome numerous bureaucratic and cultural obstacles to build the school is told in his book, *Three Cups of Tea*. His initial impulsive promise has driven him to establish to date 90 schools in remote, often volatile, regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These schools are educating 34,000 children, including 24,000 girls. Explaining why the schools focus on the education of girls, Mortenson quotes an African saying: "Educate a boy and you educate an individual. Educate a girl and you educate a community." He has been kidnapped by the Taliban, survived a firefight between Afghan warlords, endured fatwehs from Islamic mullahs, undergone investigation by the CIA, and received threats from Americans after 9/11.

It's quite a story. One person who was forced by life events to stop and pay attention to the needs of a few children is bringing to life a radically alternative value system, equipping children with knowledge and hope instead of hatred and guns. The lives of Muslim children in a forgotten part of the world are being transformed through a path of peace with justice, one school at a time.

Jesus says, "You have to lose your life to save it," and, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." It's not that we don't hear him the first time he says it, or the tenth. It's just so *different* from the way the world works, so hard to DO! We don't want to start small and humble. We don't like to dwell on how long the way of discipleship is or how much is expected of us. We'd much rather think about the magnitude of our reward or the sparkly robe we'll get to wear to the Resurrection. How stubbornly we resist the transformation to which we are called! Please, Jesus, just let us contemplate honor, not the cross.

But Jesus is a patient teacher. He knew that when you want to get a point across, showing is always better than telling. So in the end, he climbed up on a cross and showed the way to a completely different kind of life, showed us in a way we can never forget.

It's a hard lesson, to be sure. But without the humility and the service of the cross, how will we experience the resurrection and the new life that is promised? How else can we experience true joy?