

## **“Back to the Basics”**

### **Mark 9:30-37**

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He thought it was the best sermon of his young career, a real stem winder. He knew his wife felt the same way and on his way home from church, he went fishing for a compliment. “I wonder how many great preachers there are in the world.” She quickly replied, “I have no idea, but I am sure it is one less than you think!”

The disciples needed a lesson on humility, too, and Jesus knew it. It appears in Mark’s account that he was not quite as blunt as this preacher’s wife.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus knew what awaited him there and it was not good. He tried to prepare his disciples so they would not be caught completely off guard.

“The son of man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise again. But they did not understand and were afraid to ask him about it” Mark 9:31-32.

His warning met with stone silence. Peter, for sure, wasn’t going to speak up. He did this the first time Jesus mentioned suffering and dying, even going so far as to rebuke Jesus for saying it. Jesus called him Satan and told him to be quiet. Peter wasn’t going to chime in this time with any editorial comments and neither were the other disciples.

The disciples, however, did not remain silent for the rest of the day. Walking to Capernaum, they talked among themselves. You would think they discussed what Jesus said and how they could help him at this crucial time. Think again. They became embroiled in an argument about which of them was the greatest.

In some ways, this makes me believe they heard his warning about dying. Perhaps they were wondering who would take over and lead this movement once he was gone. Obviously the greatest among them would. So, which one was the greatest? Evidently there was no consensus about this. Imagine that!

When they arrived in Capernaum and went into a house, Jesus asked them what they were arguing about along the way. Again, there was stone silence, for a different reason, though. This was an embarrassing silence of shame. Which of them wanted to confess that they had been arguing over who was the greatest?

To their dismay, Jesus overheard them and knew about their heated discussion. He had to be terribly disappointed but at the same time recognized this as a teachable moment. He gathered the disciples around him and took advantage of the opportunity to teach them about his ministry and theirs. I guess you could say it was time to go back to the basics.

“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all. He took a child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me’” Mark 9:35-37.

I find this story powerful because it is so real. I don’t think it is hard for any of us to put ourselves in this scene. Who among us does not wrestle with ego and become competitive even among friends, much less those in the business world.

Speaking of the business world, have you read Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson’s book, [Alpha Male Syndrome: Curb the Belligerence, Channel the Brilliance](#)? It addresses the fact that the business world swarms with alpha males, powerhouses who take charge, produce astonishing results and bring enormous value to their organizations. Many of them, however, leave a path of destruction in their wake. Competitive, belligerent and impatient, these hard-charging leaders can run roughshod over colleagues and employees. Ludeman and Erlandson

address this problem in their book and offer suggestions for turning nightmare work groups into collaborative dream teams. Their advice includes Jesus' concept of servant leadership, without calling it that.

Let's go back to the conversation Jesus had with his hard-charging disciples about leadership and ministry. What can we take away from it this morning? For me it is this. Following Jesus means we need to be humble and teachable, as he was. It is upon humble service that healthy communities are built.

**“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all.”** You know what disturbs me about this story. The disciples' proximity to Jesus made them arrogant and power hungry. They brought the secular model for leadership and success into their relationship with him. Instead of using responsibility, influence and power to relieve suffering and inspire greatness in others, they wanted to use them to elevate themselves.

How did Jesus respond to this attitude? In essence he said, “You will not become great by climbing on the backs of others, but by lifting them on your shoulders.” He knew how dangerous an out-of-control ego was. Egos have to be reigned in for ministry to occur. Karen Armstrong, theologian, teacher and author, realized this when she wrote, “The most stubborn obstacle to Christian living is the ego.

I confess that this whole idea of “greatness” disturbs me. I concur with Daniel Vestal's, Coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, ideas on this subject.

“With all due respect to the best selling book by Jim Collins, From Good to Great, I would like to suggest that the goal of churches, institutions and organizations should not be greatness but goodness. It is goodness of character, behavior and life to which we should aspire. It is goodness that is the fruit of the Spirit. It is goodness that follows us all the days of our lives when the Lord is our Shepherd.

I am suspicious when someone promotes “greatness.” More often than not, it speaks of ambition and acclaim. It also speaks of competition. What qualifies greatness anyway? Who says, ‘That is a great person, organization or church?’ By whose standards? In comparison to whom? That is the problem. Greatness implies comparison with the near great or the not so great.

In contrast, goodness is recognizable in all kinds of people, in all sizes and kinds of organizations, in all levels of society. A person of little income, no name recognition and few talents can be an essentially good person. Male or female, young or old, rich or poor, educated or uneducated are categories that do not apply to goodness. Goodness transcends them all.”

Look whom Jesus used to get his point across to the disciples. He brought a child into their midst and said, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me.”

You must understand that a child in antiquity was a non-person, someone the world overlooked or ignored. Children were symbols for anyone of lowly status that was helplessly in need. They represented the weakest and most vulnerable. What was Jesus' point?

Through acts of compassion and love toward the weakest and most vulnerable, you come face to face with the divine. When you use your talents, resources, influence, power and opportunities to help the powerless and voiceless, you enter the presence of God.

In this story, Jesus was talking about community and how to build it through mutual compassion and support. He was reminding them that true community would be built upon individual acts of kindness that society deems insignificant and futile. Don't miss the significance of “a child” in their midst. Each benevolent act, regardless of how obscure, would build a healthy and stable community, one that makes the world better and honors God. This includes giving a waitress an extra tip, expressing appreciation and encouragement to the grocery clerk, giving money to the local Co-ops to feed hungry neighbors or picking up trash on a walking trail.

I appreciate Gulley and Mulholland's interpretation of Jesus' words recorded in their book, If God Is Love. “Jesus wanted his disciples to approach religion as an opportunity for intimate relationships and service, not as a manipulative calculation designed to assure power and

prestige. Unfortunately, throughout history, many of Jesus' disciples have reduced religion to a good investment.

Constantine believed his conversion to Christ secured his victory in battle. Popes promised the Crusaders paradise in return for liberating Jerusalem. Martin Luther revolted against the practice of selling indulgences, but soon offered Lutheran princes assurances of God's blessing if they opposed the Roman church. Religion, rather than being a response to God, has often degenerated into a self-serving strategy.

In the United States, religious affiliation became more than a good wager; it paid a good wage. Politicians knew their election required church membership. Businessmen attended worship as an act of civic duty. Being religious was necessary to climb the ladder of success. The rewards of faithfulness were immediate and tangible. The marriage of religion and economics led to the development of the prosperity theology, which not only recognized human self-interest, but sanctified it."

What could this child in their midst do for any of these disciples? Economically and socially, he could do nothing. Spiritually, he held the key to abundant living for them and all around them.

Are you aware of this? Do you believe that proximity to Jesus should make believers humble and compassionate, not self-righteous, self-centered, judgmental, arrogant and power hungry? Do you understand that community is built upon obscure, individual acts of kindness? Do you believe that the greatest challenge to Christian living is the ego? Do you realize that no one becomes great by climbing on the backs of others but by lifting them on your shoulders?

Maybe you need to sit down with Jesus and let him teach you as he did the disciples. After all, the meaning of the word disciple is "learner." If Jesus' disciples that walked and talked with him misunderstood the need to be humble and gracious, at how much risk are we?

Last week, children were front and center in the news. It was revealed that adolescent pages had been targeted by a former congressman for his sexual fantasies. A madman entered a one-room Amish school and shot ten little girls, killing six of them. The parents of these children issued a statement in which they extended forgiveness to the gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV, and asked their community and the entire world to pray for his family. You see, he had a wife and four children and they knew their hearts were broken and dreams were shattered, too.

Of the three, the congressman, madman and Amish parents, who is building community and the kind of world that God envisioned?