

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, September 24, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 9:30-37

I like the story that Zig Ziegler tells of a woman who went to her pastor for some marriage counseling. The pastor did what pastors always do. He wanted to ask a few questions to find out what the problem was and zero in. He asked first, “Do you have any grounds?” To which the lady responded, “Why yes we do! We have about ten acres north of town.” He said, “No, ma’am, no, ma’am, no, that’s not what I mean. What I mean is, well, do you have a grudge?” She said, “Oh no, but we do have a nice little carport.” He said, “No, that’s not it. That’s not what I meant. One more question, does your husband beat you up?” She said, “Oh, no, no, no, no, oh no, no, I get up before him almost every morning.” In complete exasperation, the pastor said, “Just tell me, why are you having trouble with your husband?” She said, “Well, he just cannot communicate!”

Now, if you reread and listen in your mind’s eye the passage from the Gospel that we just heard, Jesus was having a lot of trouble communicating. Please don’t make the disciples stained-glass saints. They were missing it horribly! Jesus said plainly that the cross was coming. He went off by Himself with His disciples to teach them. He said the cross was coming, and they did not understand, and they were afraid. They were not afraid that He would die. They were afraid to look stupid because they did not understand so they did not ask Him what He meant. That’s what it says.

Imagine! Jesus explained to them that He had to do this thing, this going to the cross to offer salvation and to offer forgiveness to the whole world, but they were so locked up on their own plans and their visions of how the world is and their visions of how things worked that they blew off completely what Jesus said, ignored completely what Jesus said, and they were not even curious enough to overcome the fear of looking stupid, the fear of new information. They were more interested in continuing the same old argument, namely, which one of them was first in power, first in prestige and authority.

How often, how often this came up among the disciples of old and the disciples of today! Most every conflict in every church and in every family and in every business, etcetera, wherever humans work together and make decisions together, the conflict stems from putting your ego, your ideas, your power, your authority up against someone else’s.

Here’s Jesus laying the very costly plan of salvation – speaking of the cross, and they don’t get it, and they don’t care enough to get it, and they go back to, of all things, arguing about who is the greatest, the best, the top dog. They were at least, at least, ashamed of what they were arguing about, and that kind of reminds me of a sad, but funny tale. This actually happened in my first church. A member once walked out after a sermon, and said to me, “Preacher, I knew it was wrong when I did it, but I did feel guilty later.”

God save us! May God save us from a fate that merely, merely makes us feel guilty, but doesn’t have us pray for the power to change. Who is best? Of course, no disciple is any better than any other. We are sinners all, in dire need of a Savior all, the Savior who Jesus was and was trying to tell them about. Ironic, isn’t it?

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Picture this. Picture it. Jesus was teaching them saying, “The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and when he is killed, after three days, he will rise and they will stare at him in silence for a moment, lose interest apparently, and then say, “Now where were we? Oh yes, I’m the greatest. No you’re not, I am!” Picture that. Jesus needed to change their minds, to make them look at things differently so Jesus did what Jesus does so well. He said something that seemed so upside down and backwards that they would have to take notice, something so odd that they would have to engage their brains and think about it. It still sounds backwards. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. The disciples, I am certain, got that deer in the headlights look again, and maybe they cut their eyes a little bit to the left and the right at each other, but none said a word. They were still afraid to look stupid, but I’m afraid they were. They ran it through their minds. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. It didn’t compute. No, they wanted to have servants. They wanted to have servants. They didn’t want to be servants. They wanted power. They were jockeying for position and authority. They were not listening to Jesus at all. He said that he was going to die and they didn’t even say, “Oh, I’m sorry.” They were so focused on themselves that even Jesus’ death didn’t mean anything to them.

I hope, I hope that it means something to us. Anyway, they were most certainly not arguing about who gets to serve. Serving was not on theirs or anyone’s here menu of worldly greatness. Being a servant just doesn’t make the top ten list of attributes of greatness except for Jesus, whom they and we often ignore. So Jesus, to make His point clearer than words, performed the very first children’s sermon, in a way. He grabbed an actual child, and He preached a sermon with this child as an example. He took the child in His arms, and He said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but Him who sent me.” Jesus wanted to shake the delusions of grandeur out of their eyes and show them that God is great because of God’s willingness to descend to us out of love and to serve us. God’s willingness to reach into the ditches and into the alleys and, and into the sterile cold mansions full of tears, and lift up the helpless, the hopeless, like you, and like me, to offer help and hope to selfish sinners all. If you think you are not spiritually helpless alone, then you are stuck somewhere back with the disciples still arguing for your own greatness apart from Jesus’ cross. They were wrong and if we think that way, we are wrong.

To be great is not to be grand and powerful. To be great is to be like God in the way that Jesus was like God. God chooses to descend into this dusty, violent earth in Jesus Christ to offer us help and hope, love and forgiveness. That is what Jesus said when he spoke of the cross, but they did not, they did not hear Him. That is what Jesus was saying when He picked up the unimportant child. Did they hear it? Do you hear it? Somehow, welcoming and helping and holding that one needy, socially-unimportant child was somehow echoing God’s act for us in Jesus Christ. At the same time, welcoming and helping and holding that one needy, unimportant child was doing what God wants us to do for each other.

I said this morning, and I’ll say it again. Sometimes, sometimes I wish that I could be a Christian without dealing with other people. Oscar Wilde said, “Hell is other people.” John Wesley said that Christianity is a social religion and you cannot practice it alone. There are times when I wish I could just attain that cultural dream that is so anti-Jesus of a mansion on a hill with a gate, and just mail in my sermons. Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Some of you

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know what I am talking about, but I am pretty sure that is exactly what, when they were arguing about power and might, those original disciples were envisioning. They wanted to be in place, in power up on a hill. Jesus made this faith of ours something a little more like this. Caring instead, down in the dirt for something or someone tiny and fragile and precious, helping the helpless, like that little child He grabbed to make the point. Helping the helpless, which when you think of it, is what God did for you and me in Jesus Christ.

Now, I want to tell a story. My father was an emergency medicine doctor for many years in Spartanburg and then in Myrtle Beach, and he never, ever cries. In fact, those of us in the family have never seen him cry. We think that he may have been born without tear ducts. He worked for years in emergency medicine, as I said, and once a nurse, who had worked with him, told me the only time she ever saw him emotional was when a young, helpless child came in in cardiac arrest, and she told me that my father tried and tried way past any medical hope to revive this child. The nurse told me that the staff had to more or less grab him and tell him to stop, and when they did, he did what I've never seen him do. They said he cried.

Serving the helpless and the hopeless as God served us. We who were made helpless and hopeless by the sin and by the selfishness that is in all of our hearts – that is what Jesus did and taught us to do if we are bold enough to follow the one who was nailed to a cross. Yes, Jesus picks up this helpless, negligible child to show in parallel what God has done for us and we should do if we are to follow Him.

In closing, in my imagination, now this is not Scripture, it is my imagination, but it's pretty close to Scripture. I can picture a scene like this. God is looking out over humanity with a tearful eye with humanity destroying itself, beloved all by Him, but destroying itself and each other, and God says to the angels around Him, “I'm going in.” The angels say, “Well, it's about time! You're finally going to the earth with wrath and judgment to destroy that sinful world, right?” God says, “No, no. I'm going in as a helpless child, and I will grow and face temptations as they do, face the fear of death as they do, face the corrupt powers of church and state as they do.” The angels said, “No, they will kill you! They will despise you for your holiness! Your holiness cannot be hidden, and your light will reveal to them just how much darkness they dwell in! They will kill you!” Jesus said, “I will love them.” The angels warned, “They will kill you,” and Jesus said, “I will love them none the less.” Now, this does not make sense, but then love does not make sense, and it isn't supposed to. If it did, it would not be love. Love costs too much to enter into. Love takes time you will never get back. It takes effort you may never get in return. It takes forgiveness over and over and over again when it might be more profitable to just give up.

God's love does not make sense at all, and yet here it is in Christ on the cross, held out for you and for me and for sinners and the stupid and the lazy and the wasteful and the dishonest and the unfaithful and the prideful and so on. If for whomsoever will come. In Jesus, God comes risking it all on love, though it cost Him the cross. The disciples arguing about who is best, who is first, almost missed that message, in fact, they did miss it until the very end. Don't miss it! God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross. You and I need the peace that He made. Amen.