

“MISSING THE POINT!”

Mark 9:30-37

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A minister and his family were driving home from church on Sunday. It had been a great morning. The music was superb. The sermon was right on target. In fact, numerous parishioners had remarked to the pastor what a wonderful sermon he had preached. The praise and affirmation were almost intoxicating to the good Reverend. As they drove along, the minister looked into the distance and said, “I wonder, how many truly great preachers do you suppose there are in America today?” To which his wife replied, “One less than you think!”

Jesus and his disciples are journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus has been using the travel time as an opportunity to do some teaching concerning **who he is** and **what he is all about**. He explains that he will not be the feel-good guru of health and happiness that some people are looking for. He will not be the conquering hero that will put Rome in its place and restore the Jewish monarchy in Jerusalem. Instead, he will stand up for the poor, the marginalized and the dispossessed. In so doing, he will be persecuted and betrayed and killed, and on the third day, rise again.

The Bible says that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was saying. That's an understatement! They obviously didn't get it, for after Jesus is done sharing, the disciples have a discussion among themselves. Jesus must have noticed that it was a rather heated discussion, for when they get to the next town, he asks them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

Nobody wants to volunteer to tell him, the Bible says, for the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest among them!

Jesus must have been extremely frustrated, for once again, it is obvious that the disciples have **missed the point**. Jesus is frustrated, because, after all, this is not the first time he has explained who he is and what he is all about. After church one Sunday the congregation was up in arms. The pastor had just preached the very same sermon that she preached the Sunday before, word for word! “Too lazy to prepare a new sermon?” the lay leader asked. “No,” replied the pastor. “Last Sunday I said that God expects us to change and grow, and I haven't seen any results yet. So I thought I'd give it another try!”

Last week we heard about who Jesus is, and that he expects us to follow in his steps. I said that there ought to be at least one thing in your life you are doing because you are a Christian that you wouldn't be doing if you were not committed to Christ. One woman told me after worship that she would be thinking about that all day. She said she couldn't think of anything that she was doing specifically because of her Christian faith. Well, it's time to get going! A week has gone by. Have you made a deeper commitment? Are you following through?

How could the disciples be talking about who is the greatest, when the point of Jesus' message is to take up our cross of sacrificial service and follow him? In a few weeks, the pastors of some of the largest United Methodist churches in the country will be coming to Cleveland and to Church of the Saviour for "The Gathering" of Senior Pastors. We need one another for networking and for support. It's also good to be stimulated by learning what other congregations are doing across the country. But occasionally at these gatherings, the conversation turns to "How many members do you have? What is your average attendance?, and What is your budget?" Of course, bigger is always perceived to be better. Who is the greatest among us, you see. How frustrated Jesus must be with us.

You see the disciples are portrayed in a not too flattering way in the New Testament. They have the hardest time understanding. Jesus has a dickens of a time getting through their thick skulls. Is it any different today? How many times do we have to hear the message before it sinks in to our hard heads and changes our stubborn hearts?

We are giving our second graders a Bible today that we want them to read. We are also making Bibles available to adults and families who may not own a Bible. These Bibles should not be left on the shelf, but read every day. The stories we find in the Bible are as relevant to our lives as this morning's *Plain Dealer*. You see, in every era, in every age, disciples **miss the point**. This story from Mark is not just about what happened long ago on a dusty road in Galilee. It is about what happens every week in school and at work and at home and Heinen's and at Starbuck's. I remember so well William Sloane Coffin, who was at the time chaplain of Yale University, coming to Boston when I was in seminary. Coffin said, "We study the Bible, not because it is literally true, but because it is eternally true." The message of the Bible speaks to every human life.

Note the structure of the story we read today. Like other Passion predictions in the Gospels, (1)Jesus predicts his suffering and death. (2)The disciples misunderstand his message, and then (3)Jesus presents a teaching on discipleship.

Today Jesus uses a visual aid. The Bible tells us that Jesus takes a child and puts the child in the midst of them, and says, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*" I'll bet that was a day that nobody ever forgot!

Children have a way of capturing our attention. When we baptize children, all eyes are on, not mom and dad, nor the pastor, but upon the little one. The child takes our attention. Have you noticed at weddings, when the bridesmaids come down the aisle one by one, people sit there prim and proper. Then all of a sudden the ringbearer and the flower girl appear, and people start straining and looking and moving in their seats — giving their full attention to the children. Have you noticed, any time a child reads Scripture in worship, you can hear a pin drop?

My wife and I took a little trip to *Babies R Us* the other night. My, what an array of gadgets and equipment they have these days for babies and children! There were just dozens and dozens of choices of cribs and car seats and strollers and all the rest. We're getting ready to welcome a new grandchild into our lives. How much more important than the baby equipment is the welcome we need to have for our children at church! We want them to be safe in the car, rest well in their cribs, have the proper diet and mental stimulation. We also need to put down whatever else we are holding at the moment and bring them to Sunday school and to worship. And when they get here, we need to welcome them with open arms!

Jesus says, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*" Children not

only capture our attention. They have important lessons to teach us about the kingdom of God. And so Jesus picks up a child. My friends, if we are going to hold a child in our arms, as Jesus did, we will have to put down whatever else we are holding, carrying, doing at the moment and focus on the child in our midst. We will have to let go, if only for a few moments, of all that stuff that the disciples were worrying about and arguing about.

Why on earth did Jesus pick a child as his visual aid? I think he put down what he was holding at the moment and picked up a child because children are a symbol of powerlessness, helplessness, just the opposite of the greatness for which the disciples were vying. You see, although children capture our attention, they cannot feed themselves, clothe themselves or change themselves. They are totally dependent upon adults for all these things. They remind us that self-assured though we may appear to be, all of us are ultimately totally dependent upon Almighty God for our very lives. What a comedown for the senior pastors of the large churches, I mean, for the disciples to be reminded that little Johnny and little Susie possess the qualities that God values most.

In Jesus' day, children were considered to be insignificant to the total scheme of things. There were no child protection laws back then. Children were seen as property of their parents, not persons in their own right. Children ---- small, helpless, totally dependent upon others — yet these little ones are the focus of Jesus' attention, for these children have the potential to change the world.

Our new addition at Church of the Saviour is state-of-the-art in every way. Our children in the Sunday school, the Cooperative Nursery School and the Early Learning Center have the best facilities that can be built. And well they should, for theirs is the kingdom of God. This building is an investment in the future of our children, our church, our community. Every child is God's child. Every child has the potential for true greatness, greatness as Jesus understood and taught the meaning of the word.

The kingdom, according to Jesus, always starts small and insignificant, and then with the proper nourishment flourishes and becomes what God intends it to be. Like a mustard seed that is the smallest of all seeds, yet grows to be a tree big enough for birds to make nests in its branches; like the leaven in the lump of dough that causes the whole loaf of bread to rise; like the seed that when planted and watered and cultivated becomes a beautiful flower, God's kingdom starts with the babies in our arms, and has the potential of becoming a mighty force for good in our world.

Every year at graduation time, commencement speakers tell those wearing caps and gowns to have a dream, to follow their dream, and to let nothing or no one deter them from their life's dream. This sort of talk is fine, but it's not particularly Christian. Someone has said, "If you want to make God laugh, just have a plan!" It's not that having a dream or a plan is bad. It's just that God may have other plans, bigger plans for us and for our future. Christians are people who are attempting to live out God's dream, to live their lives in such a way that God may get what God wants out of our lives.

I have talked with many people who are in turmoil because, as they put it, "I am trying to find myself and discover who I really am and what I want to do." Well, that's fine. That's a rather conventional modern project. I am who I discover I am, and who I decide to be.

Aren't we **missing the point**? Don't we need to be asking what God's plan is for us? Don't we need to be looking at the big picture? It's not about us! It's about God's plan for the

whole world. It's not about what we want to do with our lives. It's about what God is doing in the world and how we can be part of that plan.

According to Jesus, we find ourselves by losing ourselves in service to others. If you want to follow Jesus, you have to go to the end of the line, not the head of the line. You have to be a servant. You have to possess the childlike quality of dependence upon God. Remember, in order to pick up a child, you have to put down whatever you are holding at the moment.

A pastor friend of mine was leading a tour group through India. The group stopped for lunch at one of the many mission stations sponsored by the United Methodist Church. The folks got in line to receive what the poor and homeless were having for lunch, a bowl of hot soup. The pastor noticed as he stood in line that the person serving the soup was none other than his former New Testament professor from seminary — a world renown authority on the Bible. In fact, he had been one of the scholars that had helped to translate the Greek New Testament into modern English. When he got to the head of the line, he exclaimed, “Why, professor, what are you doing in India, serving soup?” To which the professor replied, “*I'm still translating the New Testament.*”

May each of us not only hear these words, but apply them to our lives this day!

Prayer: Dear God, Forgive us for missing the point. Forgive us for worrying about who has the nicest car and the most prestigious job, when you call us to servanthood. Help us to learn from our children that we are totally dependent upon you. Help us to seek your will for our lives, and to remember that it's not about us, but about you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.