

September 19, 2021
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. He was teaching his disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him.



They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest. Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me."

Background:

The text for last Sunday's gospel ended with Jesus telling the crowd "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it." (Mark 8:34-35) While the text for this Sunday flows nicely from last week's gospel, a whole chapter separates these two gospels from each other. Within that chapter, two significant events are recorded by Mark; the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8), and Jesus curing a boy possessed by a demon (Mark 9:14-27). After each of these events, the disciples question Jesus and he instructs them privately.

In the second sentence of this gospel, Mark uses the phrase "handed over," which was a familiar expression of the people of the day. The prophets were "handed over;" John the Baptist was "handed over;" and the early Christian martyrs were also "handed over." Here Mark uses that same common expression as Jesus speaks of his approaching death. The text also states that the disciples did not understand Jesus' teaching, but they were afraid to inquire about its meaning. Two verses later, Mark reveals how much the disciples did not understand about Jesus being handed over, when he states that while on the journey they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest.

Jesus' question to the disciples about what they were arguing about would be understood by Mark's community as rhetorical. Nothing is private in this culture. Also, the disciples' arguing as they walked the hillsides would have been a conversation that everyone presumes Jesus overheard. In response, Jesus instructs them that if they wish to be great, they must become like the least, and be a servant to all. He places a small child before them, and while embracing the child, instructs them that they should offer hospitality and welcome to little ones who have no ability to repay the gesture of hospitality. In doing so, they would be offering hospitality to him.

To realize how shocking this instruction would have been for the disciples, one needs to suspend the western attitudes toward children, where they are given preferential treatment and their needs are taken care of first. Parents make sacrifices so that their children can have all the opportunities that they can provide while the children grow up. In any crisis, the children are tended to first. But in the culture of Jesus' day, children were not valued until they reached maturity. The life of a child

was very fragile. As many as 30 percent of infants died before they were born, and 60 percent died before they were sixteen years of age. In such a world, resources like food were not spent on those who might not survive. This does not mean that children were not loved or appreciated. However, it does mean that they were treated very differently from what many westerners might presume.

What Jesus had done by embracing a child in front of his disciples would have been insulting to them, as men of his day, and as disciples. For any of them to treat a child as Jesus was suggesting would have made them the joke of the day among their neighbors. They had left their way of life to become his disciples. They already were being ridiculed by religious authorities of the day, and probably by their families as well. To be told that they should become like a child who is not dependable, or that they should waste their resources to offer hospitality to a child, would have bordered on absurd.

Reflection Questions:

1. What opportunities did your parents provide for you as you were growing up?
2. Can you picture the disciples walking along a hot desert road having a lengthy discussion about who is the greatest among them, and some time later Jesus turning to them and asking them what were arguing about? How do you picture this moment? What are they doing? What are the expressions on their faces? Who are you, that you are able to observe this conversation?
3. Mark says that after Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they remained silent. When do you remain silent? Is there something you have been waiting to say? How will you know when is the right time to break your silence?
4. Who are the servants in your community? Who are your servant heroes in the Church?
5. How would you feel if someone you respected told you that you were childlike or even childish?
6. Are there times when you have felt small, fragile, or expendable? Have there been people in your life to hold you and let you know that you were valuable?
7. Can you take some time to talk to God about what you experienced as you reflected on this gospel text, the plight of children in our world today, or some other thoughts that arise within you from this text?

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