

Mark 9:30-37: “Rubbing Elbows With Greatness”

Reflection for Sept. 20, 2009



Imagine... being part of some superstar's entourage, let's just say you belong to president Obama's inner circle. He knows you well, he tells you everything and explains his ideas and plans to you in person. Everywhere he goes, you go. People recognize you, ask your autograph, treat you as a VIP, ask your opinions and consider you special because, hey: Obama thinks you're special so you must be, too. Fame rubs off.

This is pretty much the situation Mark describes in the gospel we read this morning. Jesus was what we'd now call, a media darling, a superstar. Everyone knew about him, crowds followed him around, high

ranking officials paid him visits. The occupying Romans and the church establishment hated him – and of course the people loved that. They told each other the latest they'd heard about Jesus (“Did you hear he raised someone from the dead? Did you hear he taught the Pharisees a lesson or two?!”). Had there been celebrity magazines and TV shows, you probably would have seen Jesus' face everywhere.

Of course Jesus resisted becoming a celebrity, as the gospel tell us time and again. He'd move on, retreat into the wilderness, or visit the marginalized, the losers and have-nots.

The disciples don't get this. They see their teacher's fame sky rocketing and assume he would use it to his advantage, to spread the word, to mobilize people against the occupying Romans, make Isreal great again. They *certainly* enjoye being part of Jesus entourage and share some of the fame. It makes them feel important, gives them status and something to say, ggives them more power than “normal” people. Fame rubs off...

And of course it doesn't take long before they start to argue among themselves about who is the more important one, competing for the spotlight. The Bible has numerous passages describing how the disciples try and out-do each other, or holding out for special treatment. And you know what? It's perfectly understandable. These things happen all the time around any celebrity, in those days just as much as nowadays. It's normal.

The big difference here: Jesus does *not* think it's normal. In fact, it upsets him so much, he drops everything he's doing for an emergency meeting. He calls his disciples in, tells them to sit down and listen. I bet you the atmosphere in that room was tense that moment. The disciples had crossed the line and they knew it. They had no idea what that line was, but they knew something was very wrong.

And this is where it gets interesting; Jesus makes it very, very clear what it means to be his disciple, what it means to be *church*. And the way Jesus does it, is by turning things upside down as he so often does, especially in Mark's gospel. Jesus will never look from the top down, but always from the bottom up. "You want to be number one?" he says, "Want to be the greatest? Then be the smallest, the most insignificant." He then pulls a child in and tell his disciples (us) "Only if you take this child seriously, you're taking *me* seriously. And if you take me seriously, you take God seriously."

We've heard this so often, we may not hear anymore how far-reaching this message is. If we listen to it through our modern-day ears, we hear Jesus say we can only come to God if we have the same open, trusting minds and innocence as children. And of course it helps. But to better understand what Jesus *really* was talking about we have to go back in time.

Being a child in Israel 2000 years ago was no fun and games. There were no computer games, no text messaging, no iPods – not even TV (gasp!). But seriously, everything we consider a normal and even essential part of growing up simply didn't exist. Basic education, health care, proper clothing, healthy food, playing games, protection from physical and emotional abuse – it just didn't exist. Children were a burden on most families who had a hard enough time to survive in a climate that pretty much scorched anything you tried to grow, and under cruel Roman occupation that slowly but surely taxed you to death. Parents worked from sunrise to sunset and couldn't really be bothered too much to play with their kids, let alone raise them as we now think kids should be raised. Children were *not* the apple of their parents' eyes, nor the little princes and princesses the grandparents like to spoil rotten.

Kids were a heavy burden and a terrible nuisance to be tolerated and harshly disciplined until they reached the age of 12 or so. From that point on they had enough muscle mass and basic skills to help out in the household or on the land, and contribute to the family's needs. But until a kid became useful, it was a non-entity; it didn't really exist, had no status, no say, was ignored and brushed aside. They often hung out in bands, looking for scraps of food or pockets to pick. Daycare and Dr. Spock were still a long way away...

And here Jesus says: you can only take me seriously if you take this child seriously. This useless nobody, this unproductive little pest. What does it really mean?

Jesus' actions and words made it clear that God accepts, forgives and loves all of us. We call it God's grace, and there's nothing we've done to deserve this grace. Just look around or read the papers to see that we're still very far away from anything resembling God's peace on earth, God's shalom. In God's eyes, *we* are unproductive little brats, a heavy burden on God's wonderful creation, a terrible nuisance – and yet, God accepts us for who we are, even loves us for the potential that's in each of us.

You want to be great, Jesus asks? Then treat others as God treats you. Accept them even if they haven't done anything for you, even if your first reaction is they don't deserve it. Okay, so it won't give you star status or special treatment, it won't get your face on TV. In fact, in a world where success is often measured in material things, status and money, a lot of people will think you're nuts. It will be tough and you may even suffer for it. Why does this make you great? Because you'll live like God intended, and God is great. And greatness rubs off, too, you know.

Later this morning we'll have our board meeting; one of the things we'll be discussing is our future as a congregation. Of course any congregation's future is closely tied to God's plan for this creation. I invite you to keep this in mind when talking about where we may be headed, and ask ourselves how Kakabeka Central United Church can best serve God's plan for the community around us. Let's ask ourselves: what do we have to offer?

Let's ask ourselves: how can we be great - in God's eyes?

Amen.