

The Humility Ladder

Mark 9:30-37

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The story in the Gospel according to Mark is one of those stories that play well with us and our modern senses and sensibilities. Jesus and the disciples left Capernaum when a group of Jesus' disciples struck up yet one more frustrating conversation about where things stood in the growing conflict in this group. There seemed to be an ongoing discussion of who was the best, the brightest, the most handsome, who was Jesus' best friend, the best dressed among the disciples, who was the best cook, and exactly who was going to sit where at this Banquet Feast table in heaven. It sounds like my family at dinnertime as my children regale us with the very same stories and situations. This kind of talk must have struck some serious emotional chords, and pushed hot buttons in some disciples' little lives because there was dead—and I mean dead as a doornail—silence when they got into a house at the end of the day. It is that kind of silence that is filled with emotional rage right before someone lights the fuse and detonates uncertain chaos. Volcanic eruption is what therapists like to call it.

And Jesus (knowing full well what was going on) asked—with mawkish innocence: What were you arguing about on the way here?

Dumbfounded at first as they tried to keep it a secret, speaking in hushed tones which barely covered up their seething rage, they were audibly silent...no one said a word, took a breath, or moved a muscle. The air in the house was filled with so much tension you could cut it with the proverbial knife. Of course they had been arguing about who was going to be first in line for a heavy helping of heavenly bliss, for a stainless steel blessing, for life insurance with eternal benefits.

Jesus—being God after all—knew they were talking about this topic which arose time and again. Jesus sensed a “teaching moment” par excellence—a moment that never comes often enough in the pre-planned Sunday school classes, adult Bible studies, or youth groups. Rather, these moments that irrevocably change us come in the spontaneous, serendipitous moments of life. There is no time like teaching in the present moment, to grab that opportunity that comes so rarely, illustrating the point we've talked about time and time again, but never had as a “case in point.” Here was that moment of great teachability, the lives of the disciples being wide open as they were frozen by their raging, fiery anger and couldn't see their way out of the intractable argument without a lot of abusive hurt and wounded prides.

Calling them gently to move closer and sit with him, Jesus said to them what he had said to them already, time and again: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all *and* servant of all.” To illustrate the point with a unique twist on a children's sermon, he took a child, placed the child among them, and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child *in my name* welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Why a child? Children were considered the least among members of Jewish society in Jesus' day. A child was like any other piece of property in one's household: an object to be taught the household's craft or vocation; a child was needed in order

to continue the household's name and heritage; the child was property to be raised rightly so that when one was too old to work the child-become-adult would supply an ancient Jewish form of social security. By simply embracing the child in his arms, smoothing the child's hair, then hoisting the child onto his lap, laughing with the child, welcoming the child into the heart of God in this most-generous display of humility, Jesus made—and makes—a statement about the nature of God's love, God's reign that *everyone* in that room—and this sanctuary—could understand... *even* the child among them.

What is Jesus saying in such an extraordinarily welcoming gesture? As we have heard repeated in the Gospel of Matthew, "whatsoever you do to the least of these of the members of my family you do to me," Jesus teaches us that greatness is not found in self-adulation and self-promotion. Rather, it is in reaching out selflessly to others, as Jesus himself did, even to the point of dying on a cross for our eternal sakes. And yet it is not only reaching out to others in general, but to those considered the *least* in the world we live in, and likewise being reached out to by them, all in the name of Jesus.

Where is it that we may find Jesus, even today? Is it in the most ostentatious, pompous people who draw attention to themselves? Is it in the loudest and showiest multi-media presentations? Is it in forceful, in-your-face styles of shrill, harsh self-presentation? No: it is in the lives of those we consider, even today, the *least*, the lowliest among us; the ones who fail to count as significant on polls and surveys...or simply, the ones not among us; those who are absent and not present in our everyday life. If we want to see God in Christ, even today, it is not always in the one who wants the most attention, but in the one we give the least amount of attention to, the one who may need it the most: it may be in the one who sits outside on the cold winter nights underneath the railroad trestle; it may be in the abused child who lives a rootless life of foster home placements, moving too easily from one bedroom and one house to another. It could be in the face of the young person considering suicide in the face of an insensitive clique of peers; it could be in the older gentleman who is now a widower, alone, scared to death of death, yet unable to reach out to others for care and support because of his pride and his reluctance to disturb others.

Jesus' instruction is, as always, simple to hear, but it demands an incredible effort to perform, which is why we need a mighty infusion of grace upon grace, for we cannot do it alone. Christ gives us the will and strength to break habits which are as old as we are, practiced for so long that we surrender the Gospel easily in order to live a safe, leisurely life of security and no change. Complacency becomes our bosom buddy. Indeed, we are called by many around us to live a life in which happiness for self overrides concern and working for the common good of all, especially for those who have so little, or are thought of as the "lesser thans" and the "have-nots" in this world. Therefore this topsy-turvy, upside-down-cake gesture of living each day by welcoming the least of those among us in our daily life, a life that Jesus calls us to perform simply—without drawing attention to ourselves—disturbs the often self-indulgent, self-congratulatory habits we've nurtured and conformed to all the days of our life.

For example, we recently witnessed the bizarre pageantry of the greatest pagan festival that comes around every two or four years, otherwise known as the modern Olympics. It isn't the competition that necessarily disturbs me, for an argument can be made for how competition can bring out the best for the good of all rather than celebrating the lone individual. Rather, it is the shameless nationalism that parades

itself in gaudy, hoity-toity, abundance of virile bodies that are to die for, reproducing ancient Greece's idolistic worship of heroes, gods, and goddesses. We can't help but be drawn to this show of incredibly well-sculpted bodies which exude svelte perfection. The steroid filled, drug induced, anorexic, and heavy muscled bodies are shaped by a culture, a society that repeats shamelessly, "We're number one! We're number one!" as we bear down on other people from other nations who have less than we have in terms of preparing for such nationalistic one-upmanship. We are drawn, as metal filings are to a magnet, to admire the greatest of all who have trained so long, overcome adversity, yet pulled themselves up by their bootstraps in seeking immortality in the golden medal which will hang around their necks, and later in museums that praise the best and the brightest of a generation.

There are other places of over-indulgence of flagrant selfishness, for we live in a world that praises us for entertaining the vice of slothfulness and pride in one's own self. Self-sufficiency and self-efficiency in our work, our play, our family life lead us not to the community of Christ with and for one another. Rather, they lead to loneliness, isolation, and despair...a hollow existence. It is when we focus solely on the world's measure of success, of being first, being number one, being better than others, regardless of the well-being of others, that the words of Jesus are hauntingly prophetic: Whoever wants to be first—to be great—must be last of all and servant of all. In the kingdom of God to be first, to be the greatest, means to move our needs aside in order to serve the needs of others who are considered the least in the world among us.

And herein lies the miracle: in this generous act of selflessness in welcoming the *least* among us, this grace-performed gesture of Christian servanthood shows us what *our* needs are as well. Not our dreams, or wants, or aspirations, but our *needs*. In answering the hurt and heartache of others we live with *first*, we begin to live more and more like Jesus until, behold, we awaken from our Rip van Winkle-like sleepy stupor to the fantastic blessed miracle of Christ's Spirit living in us as we live in Christ. It is Christ whom we need *and* want *and* desire in our lives.

Being a teacher among teachers in the body of Christ, I want to share with you the image of the humility ladder as a way to consider incorporating acts of humility in our daily life: In the ancient *Rule of St. Benedict*, there is this wonderful illustration of humility, which is the 'way of Christ: Remember Jacob's ladder, upon which he saw angels climbing up and down? In the *Rule* it is written that, "without doubt, we should understand that climbing up is achieved by humbling ourselves, and going down the ladder is done by praising ourselves or building ourselves up to the extreme."

I am strangely drawn to this ladder image, for I often meet myself going down this ladder when I want to go up in order to see the face of Christ, a face I long to see, more clearly. For me, a way to begin is in the smallest grace-imbued gestures of Christian life, by letting someone else drive in front of us during rush hour; to give a token tip when staying in a hotel room; to put a quarter in the parking meter that isn't in front of our car, to ask everyone else in the family, "How was your day?" before demanding that everyone hear how our day was; or to put everything down, pick up our children and, with eye meeting eye, listen to them with our entire being shrouded in love to all that is going on in one another's lives.

Christ calls us to do more than inhabit a space within the household of God. Rather, Christ's Spirit calls us to move our active, rambunctious, thriving lives into this

mystical, magical abode and make ourselves at home. How? By simply welcoming the child, the one who is least among us, among those in society. When we welcome them *in the name of Jesus* we welcome none other than Christ himself who welcomes us into his heart, and into his home.

The Travail of Worship in a Culture of Hype: “Where Has All the Glory Gone?”

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At the table of the Lord's Supper the ancient acclamation of the people rings out: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory..." This ascription of holiness to the Creator of all things sounds a theme John Calvin pondered well. The world, he claimed, is "the arena of God's glory." The chief end of humanity is infinitive: to glorify God and enjoy God forever." This is the astonishing biblical and theological claim at the heart of my concern in this essay: the intimate relationship between the *doxa* of God and human *doxology*. The problem to be addressed is our diminished and even lost sense of this relationship.

Discourse about holiness, much less about human sanctity, is grounded in the glory of the divine life poured out for the life of the world. Thus, God as the Holy three in One and the glory due that Name comprise a double helix: we begin with either reality and are compelled toward the other. This is a veritable tracing, one might say, of the DNA of heaven and earth. This is why the Eucharistic acclamation is itself a rehearsal of the very name and nature of the divine. This sounds at the center of authentically biblical worship. If this is true, then matters of holiness and glory also emerge at the heart of Christian life and theology. But in our contemporary North American context we are painfully aware that how we live seems so far away from how we worship.

During a recent congregational seminar on worship I was asked, "Now that we've had all this liturgical reform and renewal, what's next?" The person observed that we now know all about the classical Christian patterns. We know how the Lord's Day is best celebrated in Word and Sacrament, and the recovery of more adequate coverage of the Bible comes with the lectionary and the cycles of time in the calendar. But none of this seems very relevant to how we live and to the desires of today's churches. In fact, it seems increasingly irrelevant, if not dull, simply to be historically informed in our practices of worship. "What's really new and exciting?" "What will bring the younger people in?" This theological and biblical stuff you gave us just doesn't seem to work. Thus speaks much of the current American cultural sensibility.

This is not the first time pastors have heard these kinds of questions and comments. Increasing numbers of lay leaders, seminarians, and preachers speak this way, particularly when the first priority is taken to be outreach and increasing membership. The number of books and tapes advocating more relevant worship, and impatience with the larger Christian and biblical tradition (often collapsed into the term "traditional" versus "contemporary") is legion. The current travail of Christian worship is too easily summarized in these terms. But, as I hope to make clear, addressing the travail is not simply a matter of pragmatic cultural strategy. It is a matter of theological substance—a matter of glory and holiness.

I begin with four major theses. First, Christian public worship aims at the glorification of the God of all creation, and the sanctification of all that is human—even better, the sanctification of all that is creaturely. This means, as Marva Dawn,