

Year B Proper 25 Turn the World Upside Down Mark 9 30-37

There is a saying: The mind is the hardest thing to change. Everyone grows up developing a certain way of looking at the world, of understanding the world through how we are raised, the stories we hear, the experiences we have. The disciples are no different. They have a certain way of understanding the world. In their case, it is a first century Palestine, Jewish way of looking at the world.

Our understanding of the world gets locked in and is often difficult to change when we are presented with new information and new experiences. Jesus gives us this new information, these new experiences throughout the Gospels. Jesus presents a new way of understanding the world – understanding it as God’s kingdom, understanding his role in it, and understanding our role in it. We see from the disciples’ reactions however, that changing the way we think about the world and our place in it, is a very difficult task. The mind is the hardest thing to change.

Mark knows that change isn’t easy. It’s a long journey of discovery and learning. Mark guides us through this journey of discovery by immersing us in the stories of Jesus’ teachings to his disciples. One by one, we hear stories of difficult teachings that the disciples don’t understand because these teachings don’t fit their worldview – teachings of what sort of Messiah Jesus is and teachings on how to live in this Messiah’s kind of world.

Mark waves a huge flag for us to let us know we are beginning our journey of change. The stories of discovery and learning are introduced by the healing of a blind man. The blind man’s experience of moving from blindness to sight is meant to mirror our own – and that of the disciples. For when you say, “Oh, I see” you are really saying you now understand. And Mark has confidence that we will see by the end of these stories. At the end of these difficult teachings he places the story of Jesus healing another blind man – another experience of moving from blindness to sight. Understanding what comes in between these two healings, understanding and actually allowing this understanding to become a part of how we think about the world, is what Jesus wants for us.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the disciples' lack of understanding is that they don't bother to clear it up. They do not understand the most crucial teaching that Jesus is laying out before them – he is the Messiah who will suffer and die. As I have mentioned before, this kind of Messiah does not match their expectations of the long-awaited Messiah but they don't question it – they are afraid to ask how it is even possible for the Son of God to die, they are afraid to ask why this must be so.

There are many reasons they could be afraid to question Jesus. Maybe the news that their friend and teacher has a horrible future in store is so disturbing that they don't want to think about it, they don't want to know more – the “What you don't know won't hurt you” sort of mindset. Maybe they don't want to look uninformed. They are his inner circle, after all, and they're supposed to be the ones who know him the best. Perhaps they don't want to be chastised like Peter was when Peter said to Jesus, “This whole suffering, dying Messiah thing just doesn't add up – it doesn't fit the way I've been taught to understand the world.” Peter got the harsh, “Get behind me, Satan!” response from Jesus.

For whatever reason, the disciples did not ask Jesus the tough questions and, because they did not ask, their way of understanding the world did not change. Their way of thinking and being in the world, which does not line up with the way God desires the world to be – their way did not change.

Change is very difficult and distressing to most people. We do not like to allow alternatives into our lives that alter our understanding. I am not talking here about making small changes or admitting to be wrong over inconsequential facts. I am talking about the way we hang on to long-standing traditions that have been around for so long they must be “the” right way. I am talking about core beliefs and values that form us. Changing traditions and beliefs is not easy and we do not like to confront these things head on by asking tough questions and having intense conversations. This is understandably unpleasant for most people.

Today, we see the consequences of avoiding the asking of tough questions, of maintaining our long-standing worldview simply because it is the easier path to take. When the disciples avoid asking the hard questions about important issues,

they turn to arguing with each other over petty issues of rank and status. Learning more about God and how to think and live in God's kingdom was replaced by the all too common human posturing about who is right according to the rules of life in the empire.

Jesus knows darn well that the disciples have been arguing amongst themselves about human greatness. They are too embarrassed to admit this to him when he confronts them but he sets them straight anyway.

True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. It is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, taking the lowest place. It is not to seek the company of the powerful, but to welcome and care for those without status, such as the child that Jesus embraces and places before his disciples.

In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. A child had no status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honor or status. Children also do not know as much as the adults around them and children learn by asking a lot of questions – sometimes tough questions. It is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Throughout the gospels, Jesus welcomes into his life the last and the least of society. Along with children, he also welcomes Gentile women, people considered unclean and worthless, notorious sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus lives and loves in a way contrary to the accepted rules of the world's powerful and this confrontation of “empire” is a risky way to live. For all of this Jesus is condemned as an outlaw and blasphemer by the religious authorities, who decide that he is too dangerous and must be eliminated. It is important to realize that Jesus does not die in order for God *to be* gracious and to forgive sins. Jesus dies because he *is* being gracious, he *is* declaring the forgiveness of sins. Jesus dies because he associates with the impure and the worst of sinners. Jesus

dies because the powerful of the world cannot tolerate the radical grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives.

The radical grace of God, that Jesus proclaims and lives, completely obliterates the world's notions of greatness based on status, wealth, and achievement. Understanding this and actually allowing this understanding to change the way we think and live in the world will transform who we are and will transform the world around us.

And yet, we find it so very difficult to change. Many of us think wistfully back to the time when the church was great because it had full pews, it had money, it had status in the community. Well, this is thinking according to the world's idea of greatness but we continue to ask how we can return to that greatness rather than change our way of thinking and ask God the tough questions – Are we living the way of God's kingdom or are we living the way of "empire"? Are we living transformed lives and are we transforming the lives of those around us?

To be great in God's kingdom is to reach out with the wounded hands of Christ to live and proclaim the radical grace of God as Jesus did – forgiving, loving, healing, giving, speaking against the brokenness of the world, living and loving in a way contrary to the accepted rules of the world's powerful. Writer and Dean of Philadelphia, Richard Giles, says, "This task of throwing a [wrench] in the works of the world's sense of order and priority is a godly calling, and one for which the first followers of Jesus were renowned and feared" (Here I Am, p.35). You see, those bumbling and argumentative disciples eventually "got it" – they allowed Jesus' difficult, new teachings to soak into their hearts and minds and, in the words of Luke in the Book of Acts, "See, they have turned the whole world upside down" (Acts 17.6).

The mind is the most difficult thing to change. But Jesus takes us, the vulnerable and unknowing child into his arms – he takes the risk and so must we...Let us ask the tough questions and turn the whole world upside down.