

Year B, Proper 20
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Once, when Jesus was still with us on earth, we were traveling through Galilee on our way to Capernaum. We had just come from a preaching and teaching tour, and as disciples of Jesus, we were eager to keep it going. Everywhere we went the crowds just kept getting larger. It was amazing to see so many people in one place, all there to see Jesus, to touch Jesus, to hear him teach, and if possible witness a miracle.

Two incredible events occurred on that trip- first Jesus fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. We had been leading a teaching revival in the desert over the course of three days, when it dawned on us that we were out of food. Being so far from any towns or villages, there was no place to secure provisions. Jesus was worried people would faint on the way; some had come a very great distance. He took what meager provisions we had, said a blessing over them, and then ordered us to distribute the food. Suddenly we had food, lots of it. Everyone ate as much as desired. At the end of the feast, we gathered seven baskets of leftovers- much more than we started with.

The second miracle was really not made public until after Jesus had entered into his glory. Jesus took Peter, my brother John, and me up a mountain. On its own this was not unusual since we frequently went away by ourselves to pray. In the midst of our prayer time we experienced visions of Moses and Elijah, followed by clouds and a voice such as I've never heard before or since, saying, "This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him" (Mark 9:7). Then it was all over, and we were walking down the mountain unsure of what had happened. Were we dreaming? At the time, we thought it a stroke of fortune when Jesus told us not to speak of that event until after he had been raised from the dead.

It was all so bizarre that we just kept it to ourselves, and honestly it was easy to file it away; we were so busy moving from town to town. The crowds kept getting larger, and so did the resistance from our religious leaders. The people loved Jesus, but the leaders were really put out with him and began to challenge him. At every turn Jesus would expose them in verbal sparring, which made the crowds love him even more. We were eager to keep the momentum going, but that's not what Jesus wanted.

He said it was time to head back home. He dismissed everyone except the twelve and a few close disciples. Then we took an out of the way route, purposely designed to avoid the religious officials and especially the very crowds we disciples were hoping to engage. Jesus said he needed some time alone with us, that he needed to teach us about his future. A few of us complained, out of ear shot of Jesus of course, but he was the leader and went along with him.

While we were hiking, Jesus repeated something he had told us a few weeks before. As strange as it sounded the first time, it seemed even more curious that he would bring it up again, "The

Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (Mark 9:31).

The most sense we could make of it was that Jesus wanted us to make succession plans in case he would be thrown in prison like John the Baptist. So we began to discuss it calmly, at first, but being so tired from the tour and the long walk home, we let the dispute get out of hand. Each person explained why he should be the one to succeed Jesus. “I’ve been with him longer than any of you”, or “He trusts me the most” to others explaining how their worldly experiences had prepared them to take on leadership of his movement. It caused a lot of hard feelings.

Fortunately the trip ended. We were in the house enjoying a meal when, to our surprise, Jesus brought it up, “What were you arguing about on the way?” A hush fell over the room and realizing how ridiculous our argument had been we hung our heads in embarrassment. No one said a word. Jesus knew the answer to the question before he even asked it. By asking the question, we realized our argument of succession was a Trojan horse for the ego. The old ego, always in the way, egging us on for fame and fortune, for *greatness*. Well, we thought for sure we would be in for a tongue lashing, but as usual, Jesus did something so unconventional that it became one of those memorable moments or what you call these days, a teachable moment.

He simply said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among us (*sic*).” Then he picked up the child “in his arms, 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” (Mark 9:34-37).

You may or may not be aware, but in our culture, children were viewed differently than they are today. Of course we loved them, but they were also an important part of the household economy. As soon as they were able they were set to tasks around the home. Eventually they would join the family labor force in the farming or tending of animals. The point is they were there to work, to serve, but there was Jesus saying, “If we wanted to be great we had to stop seeing ourselves as the *Pater familias* and take on the mantle of serving others, like a child would do at meal time for adults. We thought we had outgrown such menial tasks, but not so with Jesus.

It used to be that we strived to gather enough people, enough land, enough animals in the herd that we could get to a point where we did not need to work so hard; we hoped to reach a position of wealth had others to do that for us. And Jesus was telling us we had it all wrong.

We remembered the event for the embarrassment we had at fighting over greatness and for its dramatic reversal, but at the time it was just another in a sequence of events that left us each asking privately, “Who is this guy?”

Looking back, I’m almost ashamed that I could have been so blind to miss all those signs, all those clues, all those teachings, except they were so out of context they seemed disconnected

from our conventional teachings and *status quo* of the day. But after his passion and resurrection, suddenly it all made sense.

Experiencing the Risen Lord put everything into perspective and gave us a clarity that turned our discipleship on its head and empowered us to go and tell people about Jesus. The best way to tell them about Jesus was to show them what it means to be a servant in his name. You'll have to excuse me now, there's work to do...