

The gospel reading from Mark is a narrative which tells about an encounter between Jesus and his disciples on the road from Galilee to Capernaum. It is a discipleship story. Three notes of background information help to unpack the story for us. First, the dialogue in the scripture follows a difficult to understand teaching of Jesus about his identity as Son of Man who will be betrayed, killed, and raised in three days. Second, in the Roman world of Jesus' time, children were invisible and objectively valued. Therefore if a mother could not feed her child and/or the child was illegitimate or unwanted, she would abandon the child. In 'The Kindness of Strangers', John Boswell suggests that this was not considered a monstrous act on the part of the parent rather, an act that relied on the "kindness of strangers" to pick up and incorporate the child into one's household. Third, greatness is a spiritual issue in the kingdom of God as well as an important psychological concern of the human ego.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

"Discipleship 101"

I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.

(I have Decided to Follow Jesus, vs. 1)

Even after Jesus' non-negotiable first and second teaching about how he will be betrayed, killed, and raised as he lived into the fullness of his identity as Son of Man, a confounded but courageous inner circle of followers decided not to turn back. The gospels number twelve men who stayed on to journey from Galilee to Capernaum with him.

Though no one join me still I will follow, I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back (vs. 2).

Upon arriving in the city, this Jews for Jesus troop was welcomed into a family home. There, they were given a private room for some in-depth discussion about letting go of their internalized worldly version of the way in which God saves the world. It was Jesus' second discipleship class on participating in the eternal life of God by way of the cross.

The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me,
no turning back, no turning back (vs. 3)

"Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters", writes Margaret Wheatley. When the disciples were afraid to do so, Jesus initiated one by asking a question that mattered to both his students and God. He asked: "What were you arguing about on the way?" Rev. Martin Copenhaver recently published a book entitled, 'Jesus is the Question': (The 307 questions Jesus asked and the 3 he answered). 307 questions, 3 answers. I wonder . . . if we want to become 'no turning back' followers of Jesus, must we do some introspective thinking on those questions of faith for ourselves? I also wonder . . . if we want to be granted the courage for becoming a 'no-turning back church', must we do some group thinking on his discipleship questions?

Today's question is: "What were you arguing about on the way?" When silence ensued, he sat down with them and kept the dialogue going by sharing his Son of Man thoughts on greatness. He said: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' After that he tried to increase their understanding with a show and tell. He took a little child and put the no account among them. Then he took that young one of no value to society into his arms and offered these mind-changing words of Divine/human importance: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' Mark 9:36-37

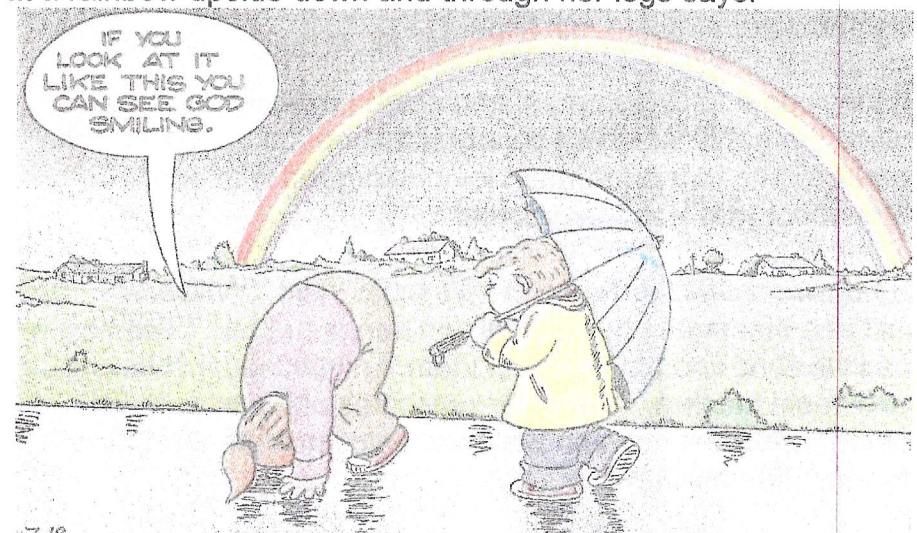
Some would say that compassionate moments like these hold the power to open the eyes of the self-centered, to help the self absorbed see the concerns of others, and to transform the hearts of hard hearted men. Some faithful would also say, that because of what Jesus said and did in that teaching moment with his disciples way back then, now we, as 'no-turning-back' church members must ask of ourselves: 'Who, among the least of these, is Jesus putting in our midst to take notice of today?' In her book, 'Reaching for Rainbows,' Ann Weems poetically reflected:

I watched her go uncelebrated into the second grade,
 A greenless child,
 Gray among the orange and yellow,
 Attached to much to corners and to other people's sunshine.
 She colors the rainbow brown
 And leaves balloons unopened in their packages.
 Oh, who will touch this greenless child?
 Who will plant alleluias in her heart?
 And send her dancing into all the colors of God?
 Or will she be left like
 an unwrapped package on the kitchen table
 Too dull for anyone to take the trouble?
 Does God think we're her keeper?

Tim Cook, CEO of Apple thinks so. In a recent Late Night Show interview with Stephen Colbert he quoted a saying from 'Strength to Love' by Rev. Dr. King that sits on his desk. "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for

others?" He said that children who are bullied, discriminated against, and disclaimed by parents are the 'others' who are on his mind. He believes that these young children need to be compassionately seen by society, given center stage value, and given a helping hand from fellow human beings. Personally, he didn't start helping out children until he realized that he was putting too much value on his privacy . . . putting so much energy into keeping his gayness a secret . . . that he had little left for lending a hand to others. When he became an adult he let go of ego consuming thoughts, and shared his truth. Now in his position with Apple, he has energy to help educate children, work for human rights, and focus on environmental issues.

It was the second time that Jesus had taught his disciples about the Son of Man's way of the cross as entry into the eternal life of God. The purpose of both of his teachings was to turn human navel gazing understandings of power and greatness, upside-down. Little by slow the disciples began seeing the least of these through the compassionate eyes of Jesus. Little by slow they began serving the least of these with a love that expects nothing in return. Little by slow they became courageous and glad of heart with the gift of 'no-turning-back' faith . . . like the faith of the child in a "Family Circus" cartoon, who, while looking at a rainbow upside down and through her legs says:



. . .and is feeling warmly welcomed and valued in God's reign of Love.