

DIVINE THINGS  
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on September 22, 2024

Text: 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 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.”

One of the things we hear a lot about in Mark’s gospel is the disciples’ lack of understanding. At times, they’re depicted as confused, frustrated, upset, and even discouraged by Jesus’ parables and teachings. In today’s reading, they’re completely baffled when Jesus tells them he’s going to suffer and die and be raised from the dead. And not just baffled, but alarmed. Even though they don’t understand, they don’t ask him to explain—I think because they’re afraid of what he might say; I think because they’re afraid of what it might mean for them. Instead, they shut their mouths and keep walking. Maybe if we don’t say anything, it’ll be like it never happened. Maybe if we ignore it, it’ll go away.

But it’s not going to go away. In fact, this is the second time Jesus has brought it up. The first time was last week, when he made the exact same prediction, and Peter got so angry that he took Jesus aside and rebuked him. He scolded him like a little kid who was misbehaving.

So, between last week and this week, the disciples really haven’t made much progress

as far as coming to grips with this reality Jesus keeps confronting them with. They’re still living in fantasyland. They’re still clinging to the idea that what’s waiting for them in Jerusalem is some kind of great victory. And to understand why they have such a desperate need to believe that, you have to understand their state of mind, which boils down to what Jesus said to Peter last week. He turned around and rebuked Peter for rebuking him, and then he told him, “You’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

So, what does that mean? Well, think about it this way.

The disciples have given up a lot to follow Jesus. They’ve left behind their families, their communities, their livelihoods. But it has all been worth it. They’ve witnessed incredible things. They’ve seen Jesus heal the sick, cast out demons, even bring someone back from the dead. And it has given them a whole new sense of purpose, a whole new mission in life. It has made them feel like they’re part of something—something important. This is

more than just one guy going around performing miracles. This is a movement that's going to change all of Israel. This is history being fulfilled.

But now Jesus is saying he's going to die. And for the disciples that means all their hopes and dreams are going to die with him. They're not only going to lose their teacher and friend, they're going to lose everything they believe in—this wonderful future they thought Jesus was bringing. And they just can't let it go. They're too invested in that vision. They've sacrificed too much, and they've come too far.

That's what Jesus meant when he said that to Peter last week. He meant the disciples are setting their minds, not on what God wants, but on what they want—this shiny new day for Israel that they've been picturing since the moment they first met Jesus, even though he never promised them anything like that.

And now they're so focused on this idea they have of what the future is supposed to look like, and so freaked out at the thought of it not turning out that way, that they don't even hear the rest of Jesus' prediction—the part about him being resurrected. It goes right past them—in one ear and out the other. And the next thing you know, they're back to where they were at the beginning of the story, as if everything Jesus just told them has been wiped from their minds. They walk along for a while, not saying anything. And then they start arguing about which one of them is the greatest, as if Jesus never said a word about dying, as if their only concern is who's going to be second in command when Jesus marches into Jerusalem and vanquishes all of his enemies.

Not that I wouldn't have done the same thing in their shoes. There have been plenty of times when I set my mind on something I wanted, something I believed in, something I thought was important, even though it was pretty clear that wasn't what needed to happen. Sometimes it just takes a while to

figure things out. Sometimes it just takes a while to see the real path in front of us.

But I think God is always trying to show us. I think God is always trying to lead us into the truth—even when it's scary, and we don't want to face it; even when it's hard, and we don't want to hear it. I think God is always trying to open our minds to a future that's much, much bigger than anything we can imagine—which is exactly what Jesus does for the disciples.

They're stuck on this idea of greatness—greatness in the sense of having power; greatness in the sense of being in a position of authority; greatness in the sense of commanding respect. It's all part of the picture they have in their heads of the kingdom Jesus is going to establish, and the kingdom they're going to help run.

So, Jesus looks at them and basically says, "You want to be great? Okay, I'll show you what real greatness is." And then he gives them a demonstration—something they can't ignore, and something they won't forget. He takes into his arms a little child and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

In other words, he embraces someone who has no status, someone who has no rights, someone who's completely vulnerable, and says, "This is what greatness is. Greatness is welcoming people who don't matter. Greatness is welcoming people who barely even count as people." Because that's how children were thought of in Jesus' day. Not that they weren't loved. I'm sure parents back then loved their kids just as parents do today. But in the eyes of society, they weren't considered full members of the community. They had no voice, no protections, no standing.

That must be shocking for a group of men who were looking forward to being on top of the world—to find out that's not what being a disciple of Jesus is about. It's about caring for those who are on the bottom—not

just children, but anyone who's seen as not having the same value as others. It's about not treating them the way the world treats them, with disdain and dismissal, but treating them the way Jesus treats them, with love and compassion. It's about creating space in our hearts to serve those who are most in need of the good news Jesus proclaims every time he performs one of those

miracles. It's about putting aside our selfish aspirations in order to offer others the same hospitality and grace that Jesus has offered us. It's about setting our minds not on human things but on divine things—not on the way we look at each other but on the way God looks at all of us.

That's our real purpose. That's our true mission in life. Amen.