

True Greatness

Mark 9:30-37

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30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." 32 But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. 33 And they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. 35 And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." 36 And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

The word “disciple” does not mean ‘follower’ as many think. There’s another word used in the New Testament for the notion of following Jesus. Besides, followers may just be hangers-on, members of a crowd, miracle-seekers looking for the next wonder. Your dog, like your shadow, may follow you wherever you go, but your dog, like your shadow, is hardly your disciple. Followers are not always disciples.

The word ‘disciple’ translates a word in Greek that could be better translated into English as ‘student’ or ‘learner’ and discipleship as ‘learning’. To be a disciple is to be a learner.

Learning, whether it be in a classroom, in a church, or on a Galilean road, involves

- hearing,
- listening,
- reflecting and
- doing.

Learners have to be able to hear the one who teaches. Otherwise, they will have only their own thoughts to work with. If a student comes into my class with earbuds and can’t hear me because of the music she is listening to, obviously she won’t learn what I am teaching.

But, hearing alone doesn’t make a learner. Learners also have to listen. If the student hears what you are saying but does not listen to it, then the words will go in one ear and out the other, and he won’t learn. A learner hears and listens, that is, attends, to what is said.

But learners don’t just hear and listen. They also reflect on what they have heard. If someone hears Jesus say that it’s better if you “cut off your hand and pluck out your eye” and, having listened, says, OK, I can do that, that person may be able to follow instructions obediently but hasn’t yet learned. Why? Because a learner asks: “why, Master? what do you mean? why are you telling me this? do you want me to go out and

do this, or do you want me to understand something else from what you have said?" Any good teacher knows that thoughtful reflection -- including the questions we ask -- is a necessary part of learning and getting it right.

But, in the end, good teachers know that if you learn, you must do something with it. Either tell it back to the teacher to see if you got it right, or tell it in your own words to someone else, or actually implement it, if it is a kind of practical knowledge. A learner goes and practices or applies what he's heard, listened to, and reflected on. If I've listened, heard, and reflected on how to invest my money and then I go out and blow it all or hoard it in my mattress, I surely haven't learned the lesson.

Learning was what was supposed to have been happening when Jesus taught his learners in Galilee and Judea. But, they rarely appear to have "gotten" it. Why?

First of all, what Jesus was teaching them was admittedly not easy. After all, the students that Jesus had chosen were probably simple men who knew almost nothing about the Bible. They were fishermen, tax collectors, and a collection of other Galilean mis-fits. Most were either illiterate or at the very least untrained in the Jewish Scriptures -- our Old Testament. It is very unlikely that they would have been the kind of students that any of us in church leadership would ever have chosen to be leaders of the church of God. But eventually they made excellent learners because they realized how little they knew and how much they had to learn. And that's a good place to start!

But secondly, we also know that one of the reasons that they didn't learn well from Jesus was because their minds and hearts were often elsewhere. They had their own ideas about what following Jesus would do for them and so they didn't bother to learn from him.

For example, on more than one occasion, instead of hearing Jesus, listening attentively to what he was saying, reflecting on it, and then going out and practicing it, we find them arguing with each other about which one of them is the greatest. Not surprisingly, when it came time for the final 'test', they had no idea what Jesus had been teaching them. They hadn't paid attention because they had been more concerned about themselves and what others thought of them, not Jesus.

This was painful not just because they weren't learning but because they weren't learning the very thing that would have shown them how foolish their concerns were. For what Jesus was teaching them was that he had come as the promised Son of Man, one who had indeed come to rule the kingdoms of this world but not by assuming greatness. He had come to serve, to give his life as a ransom for the sins of the whole world. And, he had added, this was to be the way of life of his disciples as they took up their cross.

Jesus' words have not changed. He continues to say the same thing to the church today, if we have ears to hear.... and, if we listen, reflect, and do.

Over the course of the church year 2010-2011, we are going to be hearing much about discipleship -- learning -- as we celebrate our 125th anniversary as a parish. In fact, that intentional focus on discipleship has already begun with the hiring of an "Associate Minister - Discipleship" in the person of the Reverend Paul Donison.

But, as Fr. Paul and Fr. David, as well as our Adult Bible session teacher, Joan Gregorich, will be the first to remind us: that learning that we will be looking to do will not first be head learning. We are not seeking to make everyone at St. George's and in our area of ministry in downtown Ottawa into a great theologian

or a great biblical scholar. There is a place for theology and knowledge of the Bible, but that's not the first thing that discipleship is about.

No, discipleship, learning from our Lord, has always been first about hearing God's Living Word, Who speaks only the truth. And what we hear is Jesus saying to us "I have given up everything I had for you." Listen to Him. Attend to what He is saying in those words.

Reflect on His great gift to us. We do so every Sunday when we go forward to the altar to receive the body and blood of our Lord, who gave Himself for us. We do so when we reflect on what it means that you and I, as baptized Christians, have been baptized into that same death that He died and raised to the new life that He now lives.

And when we do reflect in this way we will want to do something. Because discipleship means thanking God at the altar on Sunday morning, or in our homes at prayer, and then moving out into the world to do just what we have heard him tell us to do: "take up your cross and follow me".

When we ask Him what that means for us, we hear Him say: Take your cross into the workplace, prepared to be crucified for your faith in me. Take it into the school or university, prepared to be mocked and scorned for speaking the truth about me. Take it back into your homes, prepared to be scourged by an unbelieving husband or wife, a grandparent or a child, for living a humble life of godliness and humility in the service of my Father. Discipleship is learning from Jesus to follow Him on a route that will almost assuredly lead to our own suffering as we bear the gospel to others in the world.

As we learn, we will see that, as Jesus was taken by His Father to a place that would not have wished to go of His own accord, we, too, will be taken to a place where we do not necessarily wish to go. It will happen to each of us individually, but I believe that that it will also happen to us as a parish. We have already seen this. It was our desire to learn from Christ and to remain faithful to Him that has taken us into the Anglican Network in Canada, leading us to a place that we would not necessarily have wished to go.

Let us continue to learn from Him over the course of this year what He is teaching us now so that we will know why we are being taken to yet other places we do not wish to go, and what He expects of us when we get there.

For this is Christian discipleship. This is is Christian learning. And this, as Jesus' disciples learn, is true greatness.

Let us pray:

O Jesus Christ, the Lord of all good life, who hast called us to help build the city of God; do thou enrich and purify our lives and deepen in us our discipleship. Help us daily to know more of thee, and through us by the power of thy Spirit, show forth thyself to other men. Make us humble, brave and loving; make us ready for adventure. We do not ask that thou wilt keep us safe, but that thou wilt keep us loyal; who for us didst face death unafraid, and dost live and reign for ever and ever.

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(from Prayers for all occasions (2d ed.; Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, n.d [but c. 1900]), p. 25)