

Whispers Along the Road

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September 20, 2009

“Jesus asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’” Mark 9:33

When we exclude Jesus from our conversations, there is some likelihood that we are up to no good! In this age of cell phones, texting, Twitter and Face Book, it amazes me that we waste our private words so publicly and wantonly. And then complain about the invasion of our privacy. I am glad the twelve disciples lacked our technology. They got into enough trouble without it!

It can be very awkward to step into a conversation that stops dead on our arrival! It is even worse if the dialogue continues in whispers that elude our ears. It has happened to me uncounted times in barber shops, locker rooms and even in churches. In one YMCA locker room, a boisterous man, alerted by a whisper to the fact that I was a minister, interrupted his macho humor to say: “There ought to be a law – you clergy should have a cross tattooed on your chests or something that tells us who you are!”

Well, the disciples already knew who Jesus was, and it did not curb their whispering. Out of ear-shot, but with Jesus in sight, so close to them and yet not with them at all, they argued about which one of them was the *greatest*.

They discussed privilege, pecking order, and rank within moments of Jesus’ words about his impending suffering, death and resurrection. Every NT scholar I have read says essentially the same thing about Mark’s opinion of the disciples. In brief, intimately close to Jesus as they were, they were living on another planet. “They just didn’t get it!”

Jesus speaks boldly of servanthood and they whisper about status. After all, they must have reasoned, says Tom Wright, an Anglican bishop, “If Jesus is the Messiah, then we are royal courtiers-in-waiting.” Surely, as followers of Jesus we deserve special respect. And one of us likely deserves *more of it* than others.”

Jesus, I believe, was appalled. He must have pondered: “What on earth can I do to help them graduate beyond their egos.” When they arrived at the house they shared in Capernaum, he did the unthinkable. Please notice that it is Jesus who *initiates* the conversation: “What were you arguing about on the way?” The disciples would rather have talked about anything *but that*. Their response: silence. Shame had stolen their tongues.

Jesus sat down, took the posture of a teacher, and invited the disciples to kindergarten class. His one sentence lecture followed: “Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and the servant of all.” On Jesus’ lips, the words echoed his life. They were credible.

The scene, if we really think about it, is amazing. In a world where children were not privileged in the ways we shower attention on them, Jesus then lifts a child into his arms with a hug. He becomes the Madonna of all children as he teaches “slow-learner” adults.

Marian Plant, a professor at Defiance College, in her recent book (*Faith Formation in Vital Congregations*), asks: “How is it that Jesus teaches adults and welcomes children, but we welcome adults and teach children?” Jesus knew what he was doing. But let’s not get ahead of the story.

Did you ever wonder, “How did this child happen to be there?” This was a circle of twelve disciples and their teacher. Was the child a son or daughter of one of them, or of their extended family, or of a neighbor? The reality is that it was not unusual for a child to be present where the church gathered! Our inclusion of children in church life today is not an innovation; it is a tardy homecoming to a heritage we almost lost.

Jesus, embracing the child, then restates what he told the disciples about servanthood. The words are very different but the reality is the same. What picture could Jesus leave with the disciples to portray what it means to be the “servant of all?” Is there anyone more dependent on the service of others than an innocent child?

With that in mind, Jesus, hugging a child, perhaps rocking the child back and forth, speaks to the disciples and us: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” That is quite shocking: Jesus treats a child, socially invisible in his day, as the “stand-in” for the Messiah, as the surrogate for none other than Jesus, the child of Bethlehem. In the light of these words, turning away a child becomes an unthinkable act of monstrous inhospitality and heresy.

The sting in Jesus’ words must have numbed the hearts of the arrogant, remorseful disciples. But he was not done. Jesus then concludes the kindergarten class by expanding the sentence: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, *and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.*”

The danger in this story is that we may see the child but not the teaching. What room is there for talk about *our* greatness if servanthood is like welcoming a helpless child who brings into our presence the eternal God of the universe? What room is there? No room at all!