

Greatness will come from Helplessness

One of the coziest images we have of Jesus is him throwing his arms around the child in the Gospel for next Sunday (Mk 9:30-37). In many paintings and mental images we see a smiling Jesus, the God who cares for every one of us. It makes us feel like a child before the God we so often call Father, and trust that everything's going to be all right.

All that's true, but taken in the context of the full reading, this is one of the darkest moments the disciples face. Far from a comforting Jesus, they meet a very threatening one when he puts that child in their midst.

This episode opens with a conversation between Jesus and the disciples. He's instructing them about his passion, death, and resurrection. But the disciples don't understand. They imagine future glory will come from triumph, not humiliation. Perhaps remembering how brazenly Jesus scolded Peter when he spoke up in protest to this teaching, the disciples say nothing. They do not understand, and they're not asking any questions. They're afraid to get it wrong. They're afraid to understand more. Jesus gives this instruction several times in hopes that they'll get it right.

Those hopes are dashed as they continue their journey. In this half of Mark's Gospel, the journey theme dominates. Peter proclaimed Jesus the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi, way up in the north of Israel. Now Jesus travels south toward Jerusalem. He is "on the way"--the way of Christianity, and the way of the cross.

They arrive in Capernaum and Jesus takes a break with his friends. Capernaum witnessed miracles near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It plays host to Jesus now at the end of his ministry.

Silent before Jesus when he talked about his death, the disciples babbled on the road to Capernaum. Jesus idly asks what they were talking about. Even the disciples realize they blew it. They were talking about which one was the greatest. The greatest! On the road to Jesus' funeral, this is what they're talking about. The conversations of men turned to competition even in first century Galilee.

Exasperated, Jesus tries once more to teach them the lesson of his passion and death. He sits down, assuming a position of authority characteristic of teachers. Then he bluffs. He calls the Twelve, making everyone think he will solve the riddle of who was the greatest. Since the group making the journey was larger than the Twelve, by singling out these apostles, Jesus creates suspense. Who is the greatest? Will it be Peter, the natural leader? John, the one Jesus loved? A dark horse?

A real dark horse. Jesus sets a child in their midst. Every good catechist knows nothing teaches like a visual aid. A child represents humility, helplessness, dependency, and lowliness.

A citizen having no rights, the child is hardly an example of greatness. Yet Jesus says this is the model. If you become like children, and if you care for them, you too can be great.

Jesus completely reverses the expectations people have of greatness. It's like telling professional ballplayers that greatness comes in accepting minimum wage for the privilege of playing the national sport. It just doesn't connect with the society's understanding.

So that image of Jesus embracing a child is ominous. It's one more attempt he's making to tell his disciples that greatness will come from helplessness. There we will find strength in the power of God.