

Lectionary 25 (B)
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Text: Mark 9:30-37

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I was talking with a friend recently about her experience of college. She got her degree in three years, but in order to do that, she had to be totally focused. She took a full load every term, and if she wasn't in class, she was either studying or working. She said that, yes, she got her degree in three years, but when she hears other people talk about their college experience, she feels like she missed out on something. She didn't stay up late having really fascinating conversations, and in the process make life-long friends. She didn't work with a professor on some really challenging project, and discover someone who could be a mentor. She didn't really spread her wings or learn about life and the world in new ways. She didn't have that experience—and she says that with a sense of regret. She was so focused on the one thing she wanted—getting her degree in three years—that she missed everything else. She missed some things of real value.

I wonder whether some of us have ever done something like that, being so focused on one thing that we miss the bigger picture, or miss what we're really here for. For some of us, maybe the focus has been on career, or family, or trying to do both. I'm sure that for some of us, the thing we're focused on is just keeping our head above water, making it through the challenge of this week, or this season of life. Every day, we're bombarded with messages about things we should be focused on—whether it's accumulating fabulous experiences that are supposed to make our lives rich, or consuming entertainment or products that are supposed to make our lives full, or maybe it's being sure to be seen by others in a particular sort of way—whether it's on social media, or with the clothes we wear, or the causes we support—so that we're seen as successful or important or on the right side of history. But wouldn't it be sad if, after focusing on any of these things, we were to miss the thing of real value?

In our gospel reading for today, Mark pictures the disciples as focused, competitively with each other, on their status. They saw themselves as jockeying with each other to be Jesus' right-hand man. They were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. What do you think that sounded like? Was it like comparing resumés? Did Matthew say, "You know, I think my experience as a tax collector for the Romans could be quite valuable to Jesus"? And did Peter reply, "As a fisherman, I was an independent businessman, which I think gives me a uniquely helpful perspective to offer Jesus"? And did John say, "Come on, we all know he likes me best"? Whatever it was they said, can't you just imagine how sad, or maybe even frustrated, Jesus felt?

So Jesus tried spelling it out for them as plainly as he could: "If you're so obsessed with being first, then you ought to know that you are missing out on the only thing that really matters spiritually, the only thing that matters with regard to having a real human life. It's only by quieting the voice that is always chattering about what you want and what is good for you, only when you really notice others and give of yourself in love and in service to others, that you will find life to be full of beauty and meaning and peace."

Jesus even tried using an object lesson. He took a child and said, "If you welcome a child, you welcome me, and in fact you welcome God." And this is probably where it's easiest for us to miss Jesus' point, because we think of childhood in terms of innocence and wonder. But it wasn't that way in Jesus' time. Children had no power or status. Nobody would pay attention to a child because they were unimportant little nobodies. So when Jesus swept a child up in his arms, most likely none of the disciples had even noticed the child before. And that's why Jesus did it, to say, "If you welcome those who are unimportant, invisible, without status, when it doesn't offer any benefit to you to do so—then you have welcomed me. If your attitude in life is to receive and care for those in need, those on the margins, then you have welcomed God into your life. That's the sort of life that has true meaning and value, that is genuinely human."

Mark doesn't tell us how well the disciples understood Jesus' object lesson. But Mark shares this story so that Jesus can speak to us, to the Church, to all of God's people—because it is so easy for us to miss out, to get focused on things that won't open the way to real life. Jesus isn't concerned to make our lives more religious or churchy. Instead, Jesus wants our lives to be more human, more compassionate, more loving, for us to be able to get off ourselves and notice others. Jesus wants us to find his way of forgiveness and welcome and humility to be the key that unlocks our lives and sets us free, that makes our lives full and rich and beautiful.

And Jesus is so much more than a dispenser of wisdom. Jesus' whole life is invested in the last and the least, offering up his life for the healing of God's creation. In his passionate care and concern for all who suffer, and finally in his own Passion on the cross and resurrection, Jesus strips away the illusions that confuse us, that fool us into thinking that this life is all about us, and all about getting what we want. And for those who are learning from Jesus how to see the world in a new way, Jesus leads the way, inviting us to follow, to be a community that is discovering in Jesus the key to a life worth living. In his way of forgiveness and service and generosity, Jesus not only shows us what is necessary to live with a deep and abiding sense of peace, to know ourselves as God's treasured children and to be sustained with hope; Jesus also shows us how to be part of a future that is full of life and blessing, to not continue to be part of the problem, but instead to enter into the wonderful new world of peace and gentleness and compassion that God is giving birth to.

People of God, precious children of God, that is your own truest life. This is the life that God has claimed you for in baptism, the gift God gives you freely. This is the life that Jesus nurtures in you every time he speaks to you through his Word and feeds you with the bread and wine from his table. Certainly there are times when we misunderstand, when we miss out on the life God wants for us, when our actions just don't fit with what we believe. But that's not enough to stop Jesus—not enough to stop him from forgiving us and calling us his beloved children; and not enough to stop him from sweeping us up, with this whole precious creation, into his great and eternal embrace of love. Thanks be to God. Amen