

## Seeing the Invisible

Mark 9:30-37

Crossroads Christian Church

James 3:13-18 September 20, 2012 Pentecost 17B

When you heard this morning's Gospel lesson, you may have had a sense of déjà vu all over again, as the saying goes, if you were here last week. Once again, Jesus told the disciples that he would be betrayed, killed, and after that would rise again. This time, they knew better than to protest—look at all the trouble Peter had gotten into before—so they just didn't say anything instead. Then later, they started talking among themselves about who was to be first in God's kingdom. They just didn't get it again.

Sharla Hulsey, a Disciples pastor in Sac City, Iowa, did a really neat job of guessing what the disciples were saying to one another. It goes like this:

Mike: "Why does he keep saying that? He knows the Messiah won't die--he'll establish his kingdom here, throw out the Romans, and rule forever."

Ken: "Beats me. Maybe he's slipping."

Pat: "Remember when he said this to us before, and I tried to help him understand what it really meant to be the Messiah-and he called me Satan! There's no way I'd ask him about it again after that."

Mike: "What if something does happen to him? I suppose one of us will have to take over as the leader, and keep this thing going."

Ken: "Yeah, but which one?"

Pat: And then maybe they fell silent, imagining what it would be like on that last day, Jesus placing his hands on the chosen successor's head-and, of course, each one thought it would be him who got the nod.

Then the conversation would resume.

Mike: "It sure couldn't be Peter. He's too much of a loose cannon, always speaking before he thinks."

Pat: "But I'm the only one who knew he was the Messiah without him telling us. And I'm one of the few he had up on the mountain with him that one day when Moses and Elijah showed up."

Ken: "Well, James and I were there too on that day. I bet he'd pick one of us."

Mike: James might turn to his brother and say, "Well, it would have to be me, not you, because you're too young to be in charge."

Ken: "Am not!"

Mike: "Are too!"

Ken: "Am not!"

Pat: "Well, you guys are all hicks from Galilee. I think Jesus would pick someone a little bit more sophisticated, someone who could relate better to people in Jerusalem."

Mike: "So I suppose you think you'd get to be the leader, then, Judas. You're the only Judean. But why would Jesus think a Judean was better than someone from Galilee? Remember that he's a Galilean too!"

Ken: "I think he'd pick someone who's financially secure, who maybe could support all of us. Running all over creation teaching people takes money, you know. And I've got more money than any of you."

Pat: "Well, I think your past would probably come back to haunt you. There's no way the Pharisees would listen to a former tax collector. As far as they're concerned, you're still a filthy collaborator."

Mike: Now, I don't know how long this argument might have gone on, with each of the twelve giving their reason why he should be the leader, and each one of them getting shot down by someone else, but you get the idea."<sup>1</sup>

Sharla has some good insights, doesn't she? The original disciples were way too much like us, each wanting to follow Jesus but not really understanding him, each wanting to know the fullness of God's love, but still wanting to jockey for position, to be top of the heap.

So how did Jesus respond? They entered a home in Capernaum, maybe Peter's house, maybe the house where Jesus stayed. Other friends or family members had gathered around. And Jesus gave what may have been the world's first children's sermon. But it wasn't addressed to children, no matter how childish the disciples were acting. Rather, he used a child as a sermon. Jesus sat down first. Now, that's a clue. We're used to ministers or other public speakers stand up when they want to get a group's attention. But back then, in that place, when a rabbi was ready to go into a teaching moment, he sat down. That was the cue for the rabbi's followers to be quiet and pay attention. This wasn't going to be an off-the-cuff remark, but a formal teaching, and it might well be on their final exam.

After he sat down, Jesus invited a little child—boy or girl? We don't know--into the middle of the room. Most people believed that children should be seen and not heard, and better yet, not even seen, so the children were probably back in the dark corners, keeping to themselves. Then Jesus cradled the little one in his arms, and said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."<sup>2</sup>

Isn't that a beautiful picture? It makes us want to sing, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world," or "Jesus loves

me, this I know." We've all seen the pictures of Jesus, sitting and smiling at a little tyke, perched on his knee. And here he is, telling his disciples—telling us—to love and take care of the little ones, for as we do, we are expressing love and care for Jesus, we are expressing love and care for God.

But the passage takes on more power when we think about it in terms of a culture where children were the lowest people on the totem pole. Mary Hinkle, a New Testament professor, puts it this way: "To almost all adults, and certainly to adult male disciples focused on their alpha male teacher and their measurable likeness to him, children were of no consequence. Children were invisible."<sup>3</sup>(unquote)

In the Roman world, it was considered totally acceptable that if you had a child and didn't want it—maybe it was too small, or the wrong gender, or just because it was inconvenient—you could just abandon it. You could leave it out on the sidewalk, either to die, or for someone else to take home and adopt. The Jews weren't nearly as harsh as the Romans, but for them, too, children had no rights apart from their parents. Children were among the invisible people at the time, and Jesus was saying, in effect, "Look here. See this child? Do you really see this child? Focus. This nobody is a somebody. When you hug this kid, it's like hugging me. It's like hugging God." And a few verses later, he would give the terrible flip side. "On the other hand, if you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't. You'd be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck." That's Mark 9:42, from the Message. You hug a child, you hug God. You abuse a child, you abuse God. It's just like the Parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25—as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me. As you fed the poor, clothed the naked, brought release to the prisoner, you did it to me.

Too many children are at risk today. There are children who are abused in their own homes, and who die from the battering. There are sexual predators out there for whom children are just playthings to help them vent their lust. We know that in the current harsh economic and political climate, many poor children are being denied medical attention or adequate schooling. Many children get stuck in the foster care system, and fall through the cracks. In other countries, male children are conscripted into rebel armies. Girls are sold into sexual slavery. Children suffer.

In the ancient Roman world, pagans noticed how the Christian church took care of poor, destitute children, following Jesus' example, and ever since then, the church at its best has reached out to help children. In the nineteenth century, the Sunday school movement was begun to help bring the Gospel, and basic education, to street kids in

England who couldn't afford to go to school. Today, here at Crossroads Christian Church, we as a church care for our children, as few as they may be. Connie helps make the nursery an inviting, safe place to come and enjoy Christian community. But what about the children out there, the invisible ones? What about the mothers and children in homeless shelters? What about those in line at the food banks? What about those starving in our own land, and around the world? What about those in war zones?

I challenge you to find a way to love a child that you may or may not ever meet. It might be a cash gift to a charity, given directly or through the church. It might be cleaning out your closet for a clothing bank, or your pantry for a food bank. It might be in writing your legislators on child-related issues, to be an advocate for those without a voice. It might be in buying school supplies as we did last month or tutoring or volunteering at a children's hospital. As you do it, you know that you'll be in good company. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>1</sup> Sharla Hulsey, First Christian Church, Sac City, IA, in a message to Midrash.org.

<sup>2</sup> The Message, Mark 9:37

<sup>3</sup> Mary E. Hinkle, *The Christian Century*, September 6, 2003, p. 19.