

## All Hands on Deck: Everyone's a Leader

*Mark 9: 30-37*

Jesus and the disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands [i.e. the Roman system], and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it standing among them, and embracing him Jesus said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Imagine the scene. The disciples have come down from the mountain after the Transfiguration moment. After Jesus shined bright white and they heard God's voice telling them Jesus was the beloved one and to "Listen to him." The first thing they encounter is a boy in need of healing. The disciples have been trying, but they can't seem to heal him. So Jesus takes him by the hand, and heals him. "Why couldn't we do it," they ask. And Jesus says it was a healing which required prayer. Feeling a bit defeated, the disciples then hear Jesus saying for a second time that his time with them was limited, and he'd soon be betrayed into the system. Remember they had just come from a situation in which they relied on him to do something they couldn't do. Jesus has been their teacher, their leader, their crutch; and now he's saying he's going to leave. What do we imagine the disciples feeling upon hearing Jesus' words?

At the outset, we recognize when our respected leader says they aren't coming back we become anxious. We rely on our leaders to captain the team. To generate ideas about our future. To be there when we need them. Maybe you remember being in a new job. Or having a new role somewhere. Or becoming a new parent. And when something would pop up we weren't quite sure how to handle, we would call them to help steer us in the right direction. But what if they aren't there anymore? When I was a new pastor here I had a preaching mentor. I'd send them my sermons and they'd send them back all marked up. But then when my mentor died, I remember feeling anxious wondering "Now who am I going to listen to?" We might imagine the disciples after they had to rely on Jesus to heal the boy, they are anxiously wondering, "Who are we going to listen to now?"

So what do they do? They do what most groups do when they feel anxious: they start bickering. Over who is going to be the next leader. Over who is going to have the power and control. Over who is going to be listened to. They aren't exactly sure what Jesus was talking about, but they begin to debate over who has the gusto to lead the group next. In other words, things are getting political. If we watched the debate a couple weeks ago we heard two very different versions of leadership. Each one trying to get us to listen to them. One claims the country is in shambles and they have all the answers—correction, they have "concepts" of the answers. The other actually

has a tangible plan. One is targeting the immigrant community saying they are “eating the pets”—which has resulted in over 33 bomb threats in Springfield, OH. While the other says the problem is corporate greed and wealth hoarding. The debate was about who we are going to listen to in order to lead us forward. The disciples are getting political too, angling and debating over who is going to be the next leader.

So notice what Jesus does. He sits down—assuming the role of the teacher and says, “If you want to be first then you have to be last. If you want to be a leader you have to be a servant of all—not just those on your side, or who support your vision, or belong your group—but everyone. And then as an illustration of what he means, he takes a child and embraces him. Now in Jesus’ time it was not a sentimental gesture about children like it is for us. No, in Jesus’ day children were viewed as “non-humans.” They had no voice. They had no influence. They did nothing to contribute to society. So Jesus is saying, “If you really want to be first, you have to embrace those who society labels as “last.” Did you hear about what people in Springfield, OH are doing in response to the false claims about the Haitian immigrant community? People are flocking to their restaurants, eating their food, and telling them “we are with you!” as they eat. They are embracing the Haitian community who is being scapegoated. If you want to be first, Jesus says, you have to embrace those who are labeled as “last.”

Okay! Great news! But here’s the more radical part of the story. It’s a part we often miss because of our translations. It says, that he, “put the child among them.” Literally, it says he stands the child in the middle of them. You see, when a rabbi like Jesus stands someone in the middle, it means they have the microphone. It means we are to listen to them. Remember when the disciples were at the top of the mountain during Transfiguration and God’s voice tells the disciples to “Listen to Jesus.” Now we have Jesus centering someone who is considered a non-human, telling his disciples to listen to them! They become the authoritative voice. They become the influencer. They become the leader. You see, whoever is the greatest is not the one who leads, but the one who follows. It’s not the one who controls what everyone needs to do, and teaches what everyone needs to know, but the one who listens and receives the least as Christ himself.

It’s why Jesus says receiving them is like receiving him, and receiving him is like receiving God. God says this is my child, listen to him. And now Jesus says this is my child, listen to him! Whoever welcomes the child welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes God. You see, in this particular story the third person in the Trinity is one who is considered the “non-person.” They become our guides. They steer the ship. They dictate what our ministry looks like. It’s why at The Dwelling they tell all their congregation, mainly full of unhoused people, that they aren’t just a visitor or a member of the church, they are a leader.

So now bring home it to us. When we think about stewardship—our gifts, and time, and resources. When we think about how we are tending to God’s kingdom, one of the questions we might need to be asking moving forward is who are we listening to? Who is guiding our vision? Back in the 90’s when you decided you’d be one of the first mainline open and affirming churches, you also elected elders as leaders who were from the LGBTQ community. Because everyone’s a leader. A couple years ago, when our undocumented Spanish speaking friends came week after week to worship, we didn’t just embrace them. We started doing liturgy and songs and other things in Spanish. We paid for an interpreter and allowed them to lead what our worship

looked like. Because everyone's a leader. And those were the moments we grew. So now, we ask: who are we going to stand in the center next?

When we think about stewardship, it's not just about money and gifts, but also about who is leading us? You are all leaders—who are called to stand with whoever is labeled “last” and stand them in the center of the room. And as we hand them the microphone, we will hear Jesus' words: Listen to them. Everyone's a leader. May we have ears to hear the challenging and beautiful word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.