

September 20, 2009
James 3:13-4:3,7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

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Are You With Me?

There is a lot going on in these few verses. The writer of Mark, as usual, a man of few words, has packed at least three things into a couple of paragraphs.

But there is here one overriding message for us. Jesus is thinking about his death. Not just from the point of view of a man facing certain confrontation with the authorities, but from the greater concern of the continuation of his work and ministry. He was concerned that his followers understand the nature of his mission; which was to become their mission, and subsequently our mission.

Do you remember what you just heard read from the letter of James? This little letter is written to Christians with one thought in mind – that the way you live tells more about what you really believe than anything you can say. No creed, no declaration of faith, no proper theology, matters a whit compared to how we choose to live among one another. It's as though God is saying to us, "what you do speaks so loud, I can't hear what you say." James' letter reflects the yearning of God's heart for human beings who are truly loving.

This is the message Jesus is trying to get across to his disciples; his closest friends and students. He has been with them for probably a year, as their leader, their teacher and their friend. As much as he loves them, they still seem slow to get the message. And now his time with them is drawing short. Not only that, but it was going to end in a way that the disciples were not prepared to accept. Remember the argument last week with Peter?

It has been said that Jesus was a man so filled with God's love that he showed us what God would be like if God were a human being. So what did this God-filled person do, when faced with quarrelsome, sometimes egotistical followers, a devastating future coming inexorably nearer, and an almost desperate need to get people to understand?

He picked up a child. Just an ordinary dirty-faced little kid, one who didn't count for much in that society, probably a little boy who was following the men around when they were in town. Jesus picked him up, held him close to absorb some warmth and innocence from him, and set him in the middle of the group. Welcome these, he said. Welcome the ones who can't fend for themselves; welcome the ones who haven't anything to contribute; who have no power or prestige. Welcome them, and you welcome me. What's more, you welcome God. For it is in the powerless and the unprivileged that you can find God.

Our calling, as his followers, is to be the most welcoming, the most loving, the most radically accepting community on earth. This is no gospel of prosperity. Nor is this a theological discussion about how to get to heaven. This is life and death, this is reality thrown in our faces. It won't be easy to follow Jesus, for those who love are not always loved in return. But this is the message. Love in such a way that you forget your self interest. Give yourself as a servant, not to the wealthy or the powerful, but to the needy and the powerless.

I truly believe that God does not give a rap about who we claim to be, about any of our creeds or even about our praise and our worship, if we are not living as loving people. Our worship, our fellowship, our outreach and our daily business should all flow from one motive: gratitude that God loves us as much as Jesus loved that little child on that difficult and lonely day in his life. The yearning that Jesus had for his friends to finally get it, is the same ache that he has for us.

To love people, to love God's creation, to treat our lives as something holy, is to move with the heartbeat of God. It is the only thing that God asks of us, and yet it is everything.

So what would it mean, in my life and in yours, if this kind of gratitude and love were to be our constantly motivating force? It might result in fewer family quarrels. It might result in less anxiety at work or school. It might mean being satisfied with less, so that

others might have more. It might mean addressing injustice wherever we see it. It might mean making this building rock with the joy of our worship and our friendship and our outreach. It definitely would mean living with less fear; less concern about what others might think of us for our beliefs; less worry about how we'll make it when times get tough; less worry about doing something we've never tried before. It might even mean becoming as free to face life however it comes as Jesus was.

The result in society could be astonishing. Just think what it would mean if people were willing to listen before judging; to have decent discussions about important issues like presidential elections and health care rather than using scare tactics; if constituents demanded that lawmakers consider future generations in enacting legislation; if civility returned to our nation – not just surface politeness, but real concern for one another. Not just political correctness but justice.

Don't say it's just a dream. Think of it as God's dream for us. God's hope for us. It's why we follow Jesus. It's all he asks of us. And it's everything. It's tuning our hearts to the heartbeat of God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

Being a Christian is not a spectator sport or a matter of convenience. It's a matter of responding to that compelling love. Some days it comes more easily than others. Some days it means starting over a dozen times. Some days it means being tired; and some days it means that you wake up filled with thanksgiving for simple things like a warm home and a real bed, and the smell of fresh brewed coffee. Some days it means doing random acts of kindness and some days it means confronting your worst self. But always it means knowing that you are precious in God's sight. And always it means remembering that Jesus has hope in us.

I recall listening to someone tell about a time when he was preparing for a trip, and he needed some dry cleaning done quickly. He knew that the cleaner in his neighborhood, the one with whom he usually did business, would take a week, and he needed his suit cleaned and pressed that same day. Recalling that some distance across town was a cleaner whose sign said, "One Hour Cleaners", he drove the distance and gave the clerk

his suit. The clerk said, "It will be ready on Tuesday." "But I thought this was a One Hour Cleaner," replied the customer. "That's only our name." The question arises, are we followers of Jesus only in name, or are we with him all the way?