

Sept 20            *The Irony of Confusion*            **Mark 9:30-37**

I had heard about people getting their tonsils out when I was in elementary school, but I didn't know what it was. But that piece of strange information became intensely personal for me one day in the doctor's office. I was having a regular soar throat. So after doing the tongue suppressor ritual that always made me gag, the doctor looked at my mom and started using big words like tonsillectomy and penicillin (I don't think we had amoxicillin back then).

It was like listening to Charlie Brown's teacher (Whaaaa...wha wha wha). And my mom was just nodding her head like she understood the esoteric language coming from this strange man in a white coat.

After all the verbiage had come out of his mouth, he turned back to me and said, "do you have any questions?" And I wanted to say, "yea, what planet did you come from." I'm sure I looked like a deer in the headlights. So he said, *your mom will explain it to you.*

Well my mom was always the quiet type, so all she told me on the way home was that I might have to have my tonsils out. And I thought, "well why didn't he just say so." Then she said, *would you like for me to tell you more about it?* I almost said "yes," but what came out of my mouth was, "no, that's ok."

My little brain wanted to know what might happen to me, but then decided to take a pass. So I lived in this terrible state of wanting to know but not wanting to know; confused and afraid. It might cure the soar throats and that would be great. But it might keep me from becoming a star basketball player, which was my destiny. It might not be anything, but in might involve needles and other instruments of torture...or *enhanced medicine.*

This is not the way of a child's brain. It is the way of the human brain. When knowledge or understanding carries a risk, the stronger emotion of fear or self-interest can shut down our intellectual curiosity or openness.

This happened to the disciples in our text today. Hear it again from Mark 9:30... *They 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, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.* Then Mark reports in v. 32: ***But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.***

This text is a continuation of what we read last week. Jesus asks the disciples about the public's perception of him. When he asked them what they thought, Simon confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. Then Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone about that, leaving the idea hanging.

Of course, we don't know for sure what was turning over in their young disciple minds, but we do know what was commonly thought about Messiah. The Messiah expected by first century Judaism would re-establish the throne of David. The best part of that regained kingdom would be liberation from Roman occupation and dominion. There would also be the reclamation of a former glory and a new golden era of prosperity and peace.

The new messianic king would of course be surrounded by rulers he trusted. If Jesus was the Messiah, the disciples would rule with him. His power would be their power. They would live in high places and would never lack for anything. This dream of a new Davidic Kingdom was deep in the psyche of the all Palestinian Jews. It was their consummate hope.

So the thought of Jesus being the Messiah was heady wine. The idea of Jesus being killed did not compute. I doubt they ever heard the part about rising again, the talk of death was too much of a shock. It's no wonder they did not understand and were afraid to ask Jesus to clarify. They were afraid of losing their dream; their places of power.

Your boss takes you off an assignment, saying only that she's giving it to another and she wants you to pick up some other work. She doesn't explain why and you don't understand. But you begin to think that she is not pleased with your work, or that worse, you might be laid off. You have trouble sleeping at night. You have a short temper. You could walk into her office and ask her, but you're afraid of what she might say.

A lump appeared on Bobby's neck. He knew he should go get it checked, but for some reason, he didn't make an appointment. It didn't hurt, so how bad could it be, he said to himself. I'll just wait to see if it gets worse.

The disciples were afraid to ask. They were afraid that Jesus might burst their bubble of hope. So they held on to their illusion, preferring this over the truth. This is a terrible place to live—torn between confusion and fear; not knowing and being afraid to know; not knowing and suspecting the worst.

Who among us has not done the same? We'd rather live with the stress of chronic anxiety; trying to believe that nothing's wrong, than hear what we don't want to hear and face what we don't want to face.

As a society, we are showing signs of very high and chronic anxiety because so much of our world is in confusion and we seem to be fanning the flames of fear. When individuals live with chronic and severe stress, it begins to take a serious toll on their physical, mental and emotional health. The same thing happens in communities under stress. Societies can be depressed, one symptom of which is outbursts of emotion; acting out in ways that are destructive; cheating, stealing, lying, drinking. We are showing the signs of a system under severe confusion and fear.

Recent town hall meetings on healthcare are a case in point. So are debates in congress. Regardless of what you think about healthcare reform, if you've watched closely, you will notice that everyone wants to make a point, but no one is listening. Listening is a higher function of the brain. Reactivity from confusion and fear is a lower order function of the brain. Such reactivity overrides our ability to be open.

If we were honest, we would admit that like the disciples we don't really want to know the truth when there is confusion or fear in our system. Rather, we want to be free of the anxiety. We don't want answers. We want that feeling that we already know the answers, just like those disciples thought they already knew who Jesus was and what Messiah would be.

Mark tells us about the disciples shutting down in confusion and fear and then reports that they began arguing over which one of them is the greatest. Pick up the text again in **v. 33**: *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 about who was the greatest.*

It seems ironic that fearful and confused disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. They were still buzzing about their future as power-brokers in the new kingdom. They were trying to figure out who was going to be vice-king; secretary of kingdom; general of the army, etc. They were playing a first century version of fantasy football.

I don't want to be hard on the disciples. One of the ways we all deal with confusion and fear is to cling to Camelot--our myth of the way things were or how they ought to be. We don't really want to know the truth. We want to know the truth that seems safe and secure to us.

What does Jesus do with these confused and frightened friends who are living in a fantasy of their own creation? He gives them **two images they will never forget.**

He gives them the image of a **servant**. The way you live beyond confusion, fear and the fantasies of security and safety is to become a servant. This is the biblical image of greatness—serving.

If I could have one prayer answered for our church, it would not be the multiplication of financial gifts (sorry finance committee). It would be the multiplication of servants; that every member of this congregation would embrace their calling to serve. If that prayer were answered, God would do amazing things in our community.

Now comes the good part; the second image. Jesus takes up a child in his arms and calls his disciples to welcome children. Was Jesus giving a plug for children's ministry? The disciples are arguing about their place of importance in the new order. They are shut down not only in fear and confusion, but in their self-interest. What meaning did the image of a child carry for Jesus?

I believe Jesus was using the child not to focus on children, but to represent the future of his kingdom. He was saying *welcome my kingdom; be open to my kingdom*. Rather than be confused and afraid about the future, welcome it. Rather than closed to what God is doing, take it up in your arms. Or in other words, "it's not about you."

The church I served in Waco faced a real crisis. It came about the time the new members equaled in number those who had been around for a while. The balance of power was shifting and it made the long-time members anxious. It was ironic that the youth and vitality the long-timers had prayed for became the threat they feared.

When we took up the question of whether we would ordain women as deacons, the issue became a battleground between past and future. Younger adults spoke in favor. Long-timers spoke in opposition. Except for one.

**Nona** was a recent widow. She was the Margie Ray of our church. Her husband had been the long serving Minister of Education. I don't know that she thought about this story in Mark, but she borrowed a child from her mother and took that child to the microphone to speak.

She said, *all of you are precious to me. I'm not going to tell you how I think you ought to vote about this issue. I don't think the real question here is whether we have women deacons or not. I think the real question is what kind of church do we want to become? I don't think we ought to think about what we want. I think we should ask ourselves what kind of church will help this little girl grow up to be a faithful follower of Jesus.*

I don't know if she changed any minds, but I think she helped us get beyond some confusion and fear. She also set a new tone for our congregation summed up in the phrase, "it's not about me."

Let us pray. Dear God, help us beyond our confusion and fear. Remind us that your kingdom isn't about who's greatest but who is serving. Help us welcome your future by faith.