

At the Intersection

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Mark 9:30-37

Danger lay ahead, and Jesus warned his disciples. But they hardly seemed ready, not in mind, not in body, not in spirit.

[Jesus and his disciples] were traveling through Galilee, but he didn't want anyone to know, because he was teaching his disciples, telling them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him. Three days after he has been killed, he will rise again." But they didn't 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, because on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was most important. And he sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He had a child stand among them. Then he took the child in his arms and said to them, "Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me."

Children's Story

Sammy was a smart squirrel. He was always thinking. Even when he was doing ordinary tasks, like stacking acorns, he would be thinking, thinking about what he was doing and how he was doing it, thinking about how to do it a better way.

After stacking acorns in a hollow oak tree for three years, after stacking them the exact way his father had shown him, after stacking them the exact way his grandfather had stacked acorns, after thinking about what he was doing and how he was doing it, Sammy had an idea. He had figured out a better way to stack acorns.

The old way to stack acorns was fine. But Sammy's new way would be faster. And it would keep the acorns fresher all winter long. So Sammy told his father about it, and he told his grandfather.

After they listened to Sammy, his father and grandfather went back to stacking acorns the old way, the way they had been stacking acorns for as long as they could remember. Sammy's idea was a good one. They could tell. But they had been stacking acorns the old way for a long time, and they didn't think they could change.

Sammy explained his idea to them again. He showed them how to do it, how to stack acorns the new way. He showed them how it would work better. But still, they kept stacking acorns the old way.

Sammy was discouraged, so discouraged that he didn't talk about his new way to stack acorns any more. But he kept stacking them that way himself.

"Some day," he thought, "some day this will be how everyone stacks acorns."

Sermon

Jesus was a lousy teacher. I know, that's not what you've heard. You've had it drilled into your head that Jesus was a great teacher. That he was the smartest and wisest person who ever lived. That he had a way of speaking, a way of making a point, of telling a story, a way that was unmatched. That he left people awe-struck and spellbound by his teaching. You've heard all of that enough times by now to believe it without question. But look at the evidence.

Good teachers lead their students to greater understanding, to insight and awareness. Perhaps the clearest evidence that a good teacher has been at work is students who are prepared for life and for work, and even students who themselves are prepared to teach. Yet the crowds Jesus taught did not understand his message. They recognized his authority, but did not grasp his meaning. It reminds me of the two old-time CRC members comparing notes after a church service. "That was a great sermon," says the one. And the other replies, "Yes, I couldn't understand any of it." In the same way, the crowds that followed Jesus eagerly and listened to his message didn't get it.

And the disciples didn't get it either. Again and again, the gospels tell us that they did not understand. They heard all the proverbs and all the parables. They had private lessons, remedial instruction. And still they did not understand. And to make matters worse, they were afraid to ask their teacher to explain it to them one more time. By the time Jesus was taken from them — by the time school was out, in other words — the disciples were frightened, unprepared, and completely confused. How does that make Jesus a good teacher, never mind a great one? The evidence, to the contrary, points to Jesus being a lousy teacher.

Maybe it was the curriculum. Sure, there were other educational obstacles to deal with. No fixed schedule or location. Only makeshift materials to work with. A lunch program that had to be improvised. And the constant interruptions. But the curriculum, that was a problem. Remember, these were adult learners. By this time in their lives, they had learned a lot. They had plenty of ideas and opinions. They had plenty of practical knowledge, plenty of experience. But the new curriculum required them to unlearn just about everything.

Case in point: the Messiah. The Messiah would come one day, they had learned, would come to make things right. To erase Israel's shame. To put the nations in their place. To reveal the glory of Israel's God. The Messiah would face down the enemies of God's people, and win. Now here was Jesus — they were sure he was the Messiah — here was Jesus predicting his own defeat, complete defeat. No wonder they couldn't understand! The new curriculum turned the old curriculum completely upside-down. And this redefined Messiah was just one particular. The new curriculum redefined nearly everything.

The disciples were slow on the uptake. Who wouldn't be? But they knew who Jesus was. The Messiah. The Son of God. The King. And they knew that kings are important and that the people around a king are important, too. So they had a bit of a running argument among themselves about who among their small group was most important, or who would be most important when Jesus took his throne. Peter was probably a leading candidate. And James and John seemed to think they ought to be in the running. (Their mother thought so, too; see Matthew 20:20ff.) And the argument made perfect sense. Somebody had to be in the top spot. Someone had to be at Jesus' right hand, and probably someone at his left, too.

But the new curriculum overturned all this. According to the new curriculum, importance was not important and being in first place was not what mattered. What mattered was not to care about what place you were in at all. What mattered was not to be on top of the heap, with people serving you. What mattered was to be a servant yourself. And Jesus was about to put this part of the new curriculum together with the Messiah part, to be the LORD's servant, the servant of Israel, the servant of all people, of all creation.

So the curriculum was a problem. It overturned nearly everything the disciples thought they knew. They had as much to unlearn as they had to learn. No simple task for a teacher, even a great teacher, to accomplish. To make his difficult point, Jesus used a visual aid: a young child.

We live in a world that caters to young children, caters to them and markets to them. From personalized stuffed animals to door handles at elementary schools that are just the right height for kids. Last Friday, I rode a bike to the next street over from our house, and I saw the neatest thing. There in one of the front yards (these are big yards!) was a pint-sized ball diamond. The bags for first, second, and third base. Home plate. A backstop. An outfield wall that was painted ballpark green with yellow stripes on top and on the edges. And regulation yellow foul poles, complete with that wire screen near the top. There were real advertising banners all along the outfield wall. There was a scoreboard, not electronic, but with manual numbers. And there was a sign over the wall in left-center that had a bull's eye painted on it, with the words "Aim Here." It was so cool!

Our world caters to young children. The first century world did not. Children had no social status in that time and place. They were nothing. Yet Jesus takes a young child in his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me." In other words, "You think you will form my inner circle, that you will be gate-keepers, that people will have access to me through you. Wrong! That's not how it works. There won't be a privileged class in the Kingdom, with closer connections to me and control of access to me. I will be available to everyone who welcomes me, to everyone who welcomes a nobody in my name. And the one who sent me will be available, too."

Now that sure turns things upside down. We human beings do hierarchy. We're like herd or pack animals, like dogs or horses. We establish and work with a pecking order. Someone is always on top, and someone is always at the bottom. And the person at the top is the person who matters. Jesus' new curriculum expects his disciples to unlearn an almost instinctual inclination to hierarchy. But that's a tough lesson to learn. That's a tough lesson to teach. So, yes, the new curriculum was a problem. No wonder Jesus was such a lousy teacher whose students never seemed to get it.

Is it any better today? I wonder. Every kind of human institution is filled with hierarchies. Factories. Schools. Hospitals. Marching bands. Families. Groups of friends. Always some people are at or near the top, and others are not. Even the church, which is supposed to have learned the lessons, which is supposed to embody the kingdom and its new curriculum — even the church is filled with hierarchies. I don't mean formal church structures necessarily. Sometimes people in important positions in the church really are "servants of the servants of God." Also, often it's people far from the top who elevate others to the heights. We worship success. And entrepreneur pastors who have built churches with thousands and thousands of members — those pastors are exalted by ordinary people and their pearls of wisdom cherished, as if somehow through them we can get closer to God and to the Kingdom.

Forget about hierarchies, though. I wonder how much of Jesus' new curriculum we simply don't get. How much do we miss, how much do we mishear, because of the lessons we have learned over a lifetime, lessons we still need to unlearn? Lessons about money, sex, and power. Lessons about friends and neighbors, about immigrants and strangers. Lessons about bank presidents and prostitutes, about star athletes and drug addicts. Lessons about life and death, about health and sickness. Lessons about loyalty, faithfulness, and love. If I had to guess, I would say there's plenty of Jesus' new curriculum that we don't get.

But you know what? I don't think that makes Jesus a lousy teacher. What's a teacher to do when students refuse to learn? What's a teacher to do when they refuse to practice the lessons they have learned and when, because they haven't practiced the basic lessons, they remain deaf and blind to deeper lessons? What's a teacher to do?

It's not Jesus' fault, is it, when, despite years of basic lessons about selflessness and patience — it's not Jesus' fault, is it, when I continue to stop my car over that magnetic sensor that gives me a left turn arrow and makes everyone else wait? (Remember that from last week? How many of you have tried it?) That's not Jesus' fault, is it?

Pity the poor teacher . . . Pity the poor teacher with a church-full or a world-full of students like me! Pity the poor teacher. Unless, of course, we are born all over again by the Spirit of God, unless God plants new life in us, new life that begins to transform us so that slowly but surely we learn our lessons and practice those lessons and begin to stack acorns in a new way.