

### **Introduction to the Scripture: Mark 9:30-37**

As we follow the disciples through Mark's gospel, they seem to be going through a rough patch with Jesus. Last week, Jesus told his disciples what they didn't want to hear - that he would suffer, be rejected, and be killed and rise again. After predicting his fateful end, he then gives them the tough news that to follow him means to deny themselves and to pick up their cross, going on and on about losing their lives to save their souls.

And their hopes for a messiah coming in royal power to save them begin to shatter.

Still they are faithful to him; I think that they must feel that when they are with him, they are a little closer to God. They see him perform miracles – healings, exorcisms; they see him standing up to the religious officials who test him at every turn. They hear him proclaim the coming kingdom with urgency and authority.

Which brings us to today's reading - Mark 9:30-37

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus 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." 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 among them; and taking it in his arms, he 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."*

### **Sermon: *Who is the Greatest?***

Jesus, it seems, is a paradox of contradictions. And the poor disciples - they can't seem to respond without getting it wrong on this emotional roller coaster of following Jesus. Again, today, he brings up that topic that they'd all rather ignore – his impending betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection.

Their reaction? Confusion, fear, and denial. And so they carry on their way, continuing their walk to Capernaum in silence. Awkward silence I imagine, since Jesus was walking with them.

They get to the house where they're to stay and Jesus starts up the conversation again – this time it's about them. You know that feeling when someone asks "so, what are you talking about?" and you'd rather not say?

And again – awkward silence. All we get is Mark's brief description – that they had been arguing amongst themselves who was the greatest. Probably a 1<sup>st</sup> century version of "can you top this."

“Greatness” as we think of it often looks like:

physical strength,  
 financial affluence,  
 impressive titles,  
 name recognition,  
 influence or authority,  
 good grades, the lead in the school play, or as a starting player on the team.

Achievement of one or any of these would be considered "success."

Though at some point it might be good to stop and ask ourselves,

What is the goal?

What is the point?

Who is it all for?

Are these accomplishments in service of anything beyond the accomplishment itself?

If so, what is that?

Because there's nothing wrong with these pursuits per se. The crucial question - the JESUS question - isn't about the what, it's about the why. It's about the heart and the purpose. Always about the heart.

Now we don't know the particulars of what the disciples were arguing about - only "who among them is the greatest." And while I might be curious about that, Jesus doesn't seem to care. Or if he does, he doesn't expend much energy on it. Instead he gets right to the point.

*You want to be first? Then go to the back of the line.*

*Because following me just might not look like what you think it will.*

*In fact, let me spell it out for you.*

I imagine the disciples were skeptical, since Jesus immediately **shows** them what it looks like to follow him. He takes up a child in his arms and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

But don't picture the cute, old-timey, Sunday School poster of Jesus with a passel of adorable little children at his feet with one on his knee. No... picture a dirty, hungry, fearful waif dressed in rags.

You see, children in biblical times (and still in some countries today even) were not at all as important as they are in our day and time. More than half of them did not live to be adults. When there was a shortage of food, children were fed last.

This wasn't intended to be cruel. It was really a matter of survival. And because children had no rights, parents could do to them whatever they thought necessary to make the children obedient or to force them to work for the family.

It was not a good time to be a child. Children, along with tax collectors and sinners were considered to be second-class citizens.

So, Jesus' point is this – welcome the least, the outcast, those whom society doesn't notice or care about – this is how you're going to be the greatest, this is how to follow Christ.

Again, and again, Jesus turns everything upside down. What we think are “great” achievements, might not be. What society casts aside - that is where we’re to focus.

This past week I read the book, *Same Kind of Different As Me*. It made the NYT bestseller’s list in 2009, and in 2017 it was made into a movie. It’s the true story about Denver Moore, a black homeless man, born in 1937 on a plantation in Louisiana, and Ron and Debbie Hall, a wealthy couple living in Fort Worth TX, and how their lives intersected and impacted each other beyond imagining.

Denver grew up essentially a slave, was roped and dragged by the KKK when he was 15. He spent 10 years in Angola prison for armed robbery, after which he landed homeless in Fort Worth at the age of 39. Twenty years later, still homeless, he encountered Ron and Debbie Hall who were volunteering at a soup kitchen.

Ron and Debbie were the exact opposite from Denver! Ron was an art dealer and they swirled with the rich and famous of Texas as well as the art scene in NY and LA. They were Christians and at Debbie’s insisting began volunteering once a week at the Union Gospel Mission for the homeless in Fort Worth.

Denver was an angry loner, whom most people feared. No one knew his story and he was something of a mystery to the staff at the mission as well as the others who were homeless.

Ron approached his time at the homeless mission as “what the rich do for the destitute,” and Denver saw Ron as just another suit trying to score brownie points with God. The walls were up! But God had something else in mind. So began a long and deep relationship between the Halls and Denver.

As the months pass, they begin to let each other in, to trust each other. And Ron finds himself being schooled in what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to serve.

Here is one of these moments. Ron writes:

I had known Mr. Ballantine when he stayed at the mission. Sometime before Deborah and I started serving there, Denver told us, he had watched a car screech up to the curb [redacted]. The driver shoved an elderly man out of the passenger-side door, pitched a beat-up Tourister suitcase out behind him, and roared away. Abandoned on the curb, the old man staggered like a drunken sailor on shore leave and fired off a salvo of slurry curses. But to Denver, he also looked . . . scared. At the time, Denver had still been an island, a stone-faced loner who didn't poke about in other people's business. But something—he thinks now maybe it was how helpless the man looked—plucked a string in his heart.

Denver walked up to the man and offered to help him get into the mission. In return, the man cursed him and called him a nigger.

Denver helped anyway, learning in the process that the fellow's name was Ballantine, that he was a mean old drunk who'd earned his family's contempt, and that he hated black people. He hated Christians even more, considered them a pack of mewling, insipid hypocrites. That's why, free meal or not, he would rather have starved than endure a chapel sermon. Others might have let him. Instead, for about two years, Denver ordered two plates of food in the serving line and took one upstairs to Mr. Ballantine. Foul-tempered, cantankerous, and utterly remorseless, Mr. Ballantine continued to address his benefactor as "nigger."

The next year a hoodlum jumped Mr. Ballantine outside the mission and demanded his Social Security check. Rather than give in, the old man submitted to a vicious beating that left him a cripple. Unequipped to care for an invalid, the director had no choice but to find space for Mr. Ballantine in a government-funded nursing center. There, minimum-wage orderlies tended to the basics, but the truth was Mr. Ballantine, at eighty-five, found himself hobbled, helpless, and completely alone. Except for Denver. After the old man's relocation, Denver regularly walked the two miles through the hood to take Mr. Ballantine some non-nursing-home food or a few cigarettes.

One day, Denver asked me to drive him there. In some ways, I wish he hadn't, since the trip stripped off my do-gooder veneer to reveal a squeamish man whose charity, at the time, had definite limits.

When we entered Mr. Ballantine's room at the nursing home, the smell hit me first—the stench of age, dead skin, and bodily fluids. The old man lay on his bed in a puddle of urine, naked except for a neon orange ski jacket. His ghostly chicken-bone legs sprawled across a sheet that had once been white but now was dingy gray, streaked with brown and other stains. Around him lay strewn trash and trays of half-eaten food . . . scrambled eggs, crusted hard-yellow . . . shriveled meats . . . petrified sandwiches. On a couple of trays, school-lunch-size milk cartons, tipped over, the puddles congealed into stinking clabber.

In a single, sweeping glance, Denver sized up the room, then me, wobbling and on the verge of vomit. "Mr. Ron just come to say hi," he told Mr. Ballantine. "He got to be goin now."

I bolted, leaving Denver alone to clean up Mr. Ballantine and his nasty room. I didn't offer to help, or even to stay and pray. Feeling guilty, but not guilty enough to change, I jumped in my car and wept as I drove away—for Mr. Ballantine, homeless and decrepit, who would stew in his own excrement if not for Denver; and I wept for myself, because I didn't have the courage to stay. It was easy for someone like me to serve a few meals, write a few checks,

But Denver served invisibly, loved without fanfare. The tables had turned, and I now feared that it was he who would catch-and-release me, a person who lacked true compassion, who perhaps wasn't a catch worth keeping.

I gained a new and more profound respect for Denver that day, my perception of him changing like puzzle pieces slowly clicking into place. He wasn't showing off, only sharing with me a secret part of his life.

in which he was nursing this man who never said thank you and continued to call him "nigger."

For the first time, it struck me that when Denver said he'd be my friend for life, he meant it—for better or for worse. The hell of it was, Mr. Ballantine never wanted a friend, especially a black one. But once Denver committed, he stuck. It reminded me of what Jesus told His disciples: "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

As followers of Christ, we are called upon to relate to others in a new way – counting others rather than counting the cost, measuring growth in terms of the depth of our faith rather than the number of programs or people who show up.

This way is so different and so extraordinary that it probably won't be noticed on a grand scale. It won't make headlines or the evening news. It may go unnoticed. But if we're on track, following Jesus, we won't care.

In the Kingdom of God it is the unnamed, the unheralded, and unnoticed ones who are already doing God's work in the world, who bear Christ to the neighbor.

Because, when you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you don't need to make a name for yourself. You already bear the name Christian. What more do you need?  
Amen.

Ron Hall and Denver Moore, with Lynn Vincent, "same kind of different as me." W. Publishing, 2006.