

Afraid to Ask Mark 9:30-37

Jesus' disciples "didn't know what he was talking about, but [they] were afraid to ask him about it." Asking good question is an important life skill. Many people spend their lives looking for the answers. How wise is the person who spends her (or his) life seeking the questions. And the best questions are the ones we actually ask!

The best questions have no "ready-made answers," but lead us to discover own answers "if we have the will to do so; if we are not afraid of confrontation with ourselves." (Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*). Have you ever been afraid to ask a question because you thought it might reveal that you're not with it, that you're not very smart? Each of us has been in that situation before, yet when that silent question is asked, it seems that many people share that same question. When people have the courage to ask their questions, we are often prompted to discover our own answers and clarify our own deeper questions.

Have you ever been afraid to ask a question because you think you do know the answer and you don't want to hear it? That's the situation in which Jesus' disciples found themselves in today's scripture lesson (Mark 9: 30-37).

The passage begins with Jesus and his disciples walking through the countryside, all by themselves. Jesus starts talking, "'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.' They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it."

What was Jesus talking about? That's a good question. There is probably some truth in many explanations as to what Jesus meant. Author Ched Myers, in his book *Binding the Strong Man*, offers a compelling suggestion. Jesus was teaching them the "way of the cross". For Jesus, this was a literal journey ending in a literal cross. Jesus had been confronting and challenging the "powers that be" of Rome and the Temple leadership. He was pretty confident what the result would be.

For his disciples and the rest of us, the "way of the cross" is not necessarily a call to walk a path toward literal martyrdom. It does reflect Jesus' vision, perhaps God's vision through Jesus, of life lived in relationship with God as we are called to live it. The "way of the cross" is what it means to follow Jesus.

Taken as a whole, Jesus' vision has two features. First is a non-violent resistance to oppressive powers. These were Rome and the Temple in Jesus' time. There are oppressive powers of our own day. Second is a new way of living together in community. It is called servant-hood and it is a way of living that is *non-dominational*.

The disciples were all about domination, like many of us. We want winners. We root for winners and we don't want to be losers. Jesus' disciples had been fussing and squabbling with each other out of earshot of Jesus about who would be more important in the Kingdom of God. They were talking winners and losers.

"What were you guys talking about on the road?" That was a good question Jesus asked them once they reached their headquarters in Capernaum. "The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest." It was a teachable moment.

"So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all. He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, 'Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.'"

We can hardly grasp what a *mouthful* Jesus said with these words and with the illustration of holding a child and comparing himself to the child.

Today, we focus on children. We adore them and nurture them. Sometimes, we place them on *pedestals*! In Jesus' day, children were beneath contempt. They were ignored, if they were lucky, until they reached the age of adulthood. Children occupied the lowest social level in the community and in the home. There was no better example in first-century culture of *the least* than a child.

It was utterly amazing for Jesus to welcome a child, hold and cradle it, and compare himself to a child. "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me." He even compares God to a child, a despised and overlooked one. And the disciples "didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it."

What was the question the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus? I suspect it was, "What's this all about anyway?" "What are you all about, Jesus?" Why were they afraid to ask? Maybe they were afraid because they didn't have a clue. Maybe they were afraid because his answer would confirm that their expectations were a little off? Or maybe, they were afraid because they knew, deep in the pits of their stomachs, just what Jesus was talking about.

The thought that they might be right scared them to death. The idea that this was also the path they were walking made them anxious. When we hear what Jesus was really talking about, what it means to follow Jesus' teaching in our own place and time, maybe we'll be scared too. Maybe we should be at least a little anxious.

This question-asking thing can go both ways. My question for you is prompted by a recent article by Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback super church and author of the well-known *Purpose-Drive* books. Warren's wife was diagnosed with cancer this year during the same time period when the sale of his books made them quite wealthy. The convergence of these significant event led him to think a lot about the purpose of life. In this article, he stated simply that life is about getting ready for eternity.

There is some truth to that view. We find an eternal dimension to our temporal lives. How and why we live in this life is connected to our relationship with God and that relationship moves beyond the limits of these few years and our limited geography. The biggest problem with the view that Warren and many other Christians espouse is that it tends to take us away from this life. It is a perspective that tends to move us out of this world and focus on the next life. Focusing so much on life after death leads to Christians becoming concerning almost entirely with helping people get into the *correct* side of eternity – into heaven

Living with a focus on getting out of this world is contrary to my understanding of the Kingdom of God that Jesus was teaching about. Without discounting or disregarding the eternal dimension of life, I see Jesus' teaching, and the focus of our faith in him, as being very much in the here and now.

That leads us to a predicament. If the purpose of life is not primarily to get ourselves and others into heaven and to prepare us for eternity, what is the purpose? To borrow from the language of business, if you're in a business, it's really crucial to know just what your core business is. What is it that you do that is behind everything else you do?

So, my question to you is, "what is the core business of Crossroads Church?" We do lots of stuff at Crossroads. We do lots of it really well. We do worship well. We do festive celebrations such as the *Sermon on the Mound* and other party occasions really well. We do musical theater well and theological exploration well. We have a passion for missions work and do a lot of that really well. We even do governance pretty well.

But what is underneath, behind, and foundational to all those things we do? What is it we do that is behind everything else we do? (at this point in the actual sermon presentation, the congregation divided into several small groups to answer this question. Responses were then shared with everything present and preserved for sharing with the entire congregation)

Once we begin to know our answers to that core business that question, the next question to ask is: what will we do to focus more on that core business? Then, we'll need to decide how we will determine our success in doing that.

We have affirmed many times in this community that, on the journey of faith, in the life of following Jesus, and in the life of being Crossroads Church, the most "important thing is not the finding. It is the seeking [and the] devotion with which one spins the wheel of prayer and scripture, discovering the truth little by little."

We're like Rabbi Zuscha who, on his death bed, was asked what life would be like beyond grave. "I don't know," he replied, "but I do know this: when I get there, I won't be asked 'Why weren't you Moses?' or 'Why weren't you David?' I'll be asked only 'Why weren't you Zuscha?'"

God is calling us to become ourselves and to live out of who we are as full partners with God in transforming this world into the "Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ." This is a call to living with open eyes, open minds, and open hearts in Jesus' name.