

“Drawing Comparisons – or Drawing Near to God?”

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Mark 9:30-37 *The Message*; James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a *NRSV* New London UMC Rev. Rich

What do we do when we meet someone? To use a familiar term: we “size them up.” We do a quick assessment that draws a comparison between us and them. Almost without thinking about it we run through a check list of comparisons: Is this person taller or shorter than me? Thinner or fatter? Neater or grubbier? More well off or less well off? More or less emotionally intense – positively or negatively?

Why do we do that? It helps us to get a first impression of where we might stand with this person. Are we social equals – or will one person have more power or authority than the other? Is this going to be a dangerous encounter or a pleasant encounter? Can or should we trust this person, and can or should they trust us? . . . We feel the need to sort these things out, don’t we? And that’s just what we do when we first meet someone!

When we’re with people that we know better, that we have an established relationship with, we run more refined comparison check lists. We see this in our reading from the Gospel of Mark in the relationships between Jesus and the twelve disciples, and the relationships the disciples have with each other. We pick up on some tension between the disciples and Jesus when he says:

“The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder he will rise, alive.”

Mark 9:31b The Message

The disciples were hearing Jesus say (for the second time) that he expected to die soon. The first time that Jesus had talked about this with them, Peter had objected – and that didn’t go over well with Jesus. He told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” So this second time when Jesus brings up the topic of his death, none of the disciples ventured to say or ask anything. The scripture says they were afraid. . . . Jesus was not only their teacher and leader, but they believed he was also their Messiah. Their expectation was that God’s anointed Messiah would lead their people to break free from Roman oppression. To be a victor, not a victim of murder. . . . Do you think they were afraid to ask Jesus any questions because they didn’t WANT to understand? Because as long as they *didn’t* ask Jesus to elaborate they didn’t have to know FOR SURE that their expectations of what the Messiah would be and do was totally wrong. And were they afraid that they didn’t know what they would do without him; and/or also scared to learn what it would mean for them if he rose from death and was alive again? Did they just **not** want Jesus to know how confused they were over what he’d already said? Did they **not** want him to think less of them for not understanding – or not *wanting* to understand? . . . But then the disciples seemed to have some discussion amongst themselves about what might happen if Jesus

were no longer with them. Who among them was the greatest, the heir apparent, the one who would become their leader if Jesus died? Who would that be?

When they got to Capernaum, Jesus asked them what they had been talking about while they had been walking. Once again none of the disciples wanted to say anything. This time perhaps their fear was that Jesus would not agree with their own assessment of who among them was the greatest. But apparently Jesus knew them too well and he already understood what their conversation was about. So Jesus brought them together and told them that if they wanted to be in first place, they would have to take last place. They would have to be the servant of all. Let me stop and explain, that was actually a real position to be “servant of all.” It was *the* lowest rank of all the servants in a household. How low was it? It was so low that the servant of all was only allowed to eat what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill. That is rock bottom last in the pecking order. . . . And, once again, not what the disciples had expected Jesus to say. And also probably not what they had wanted to hear from Jesus. They might have hoped that Jesus would name his successor right there and then. But no! He says if any of them want to be number one they aren’t there yet on the servant meter. How confusing that must have been for the disciples! And how clear it must have been to Jesus that his twelve disciples didn’t understand him.

But did Jesus walk away from the Twelve? Did he give up on them? No. He tried to come at it from another angle. He tried to find another way to help his disciples understand. So Jesus cradled a little child in his arms and told the disciples:

“Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me – God who sent me.”

Mark 9:37 The Message

Now the disciples knew that a child had basically no social standing, authority, or power. To think that warmly welcoming a child could be on par with, or an equal substitute for warmly welcoming Jesus their Messiah – or even God! – was unheard of! Perhaps totally mind blowing. I imagine the disciples were simply aghast and so shocked they couldn’t have said anything.

And if we really think about it – do we understand what Jesus is saying? How do Jesus and God feel the loving kindness that we offer to a child? How does that embrace reach Jesus and God? Or how are they present in that embrace? Is this something that James would name as a way to draw near to God? To pay attention and be present to children? To see and reach out to someone who has no social standing, authority, or power? To put ourselves at the same level – and to effectively eliminate the concept of levels? To stop comparing ourselves to other people and instead compassionately join with them in living our lives? Will Jesus and God be with us if we live together as servants of all? Amen.