

“Confused Disciples” – Mark 1:29-39

Is your head spinning? Mine was after the first time I read through the passage from Mark’s gospel that we just heard. To be honest, my head was still spinning after the twentieth time I read through it. At first I thought it might be the meds ... the stuff I was taking to try to beat back the symptoms of a bad head cold this week. But no, even as the meds stopped and the head cold subsided a bit, that dizzy, swimming feeling still came back on each reading.

Eventually I realized that it was the dizzying pace of the text itself that was the problem. From the synagogue to the house, four fast names speeding by (will there be a test?), Simon’s mother-in-law, a quick healing, a meal, it’s evening, the whole city at the door, curing and casting out demons, it’s morning, Jesus is missing, Simon and the boys form a search party, a confrontation, and then all over Galilee! WHEW! Did I miss anything? All of that, in eleven short verses!

No wonder the poor disciples were confused ... at least in Mark’s gospel. Naturally, by the time we get to Matthew’s and Luke’s versions, they get a lot better press, but here in Mark’s gospel as everything happens “immediately” they can’t keep up with the developing story. Mind you, once we get to the end of Mark’s gospel we see why he has painted them as being so confused. It’s only with the flash of understanding at the cross that the disciples – and the world – finally come to understand the meaning of the events that have unfolded over the past few years.

Maybe we can use that understanding to work the process backwards. Knowing that Jesus will be revealed on the cross as the messiah, let’s come back to this text and see if it can be less confusing as we look at it – slowly, this time! The dizziness from the first reading gives us a clue that we might have experienced a form of “spacial dislocation” – it’s the effect that designers of roller coasters and other thrill rides use to add excitement to the ride. The effect comes from rapidly shifting locations, or views, so fast that the brain can’t quite keep up. As we slow down we can begin to identify those shifts, and a pattern emerges.

Going slowwwwly, now, we begin to notice that there are (at least) four different scenes in these few short verses: Simon’s house with his sick mother; Simon’s house with a large crowd being healed; a deserted place where Jesus prayed; and finally all of Galilee. There, that doesn’t seem so bad, does it? We might also note now that we’re replaying it in slow-mo that the whole episode is bracketed by beginning at a synagogue, and ending at synagogues (one could, I think, argue from this that perhaps Mark was suggesting Jesus only found himself spiritually “away from church”, but I won’t go that far today).

Did you notice another pattern emerging from recognizing four short scenes here? It becomes a little clearer if we had started reading a bit before this, where Jesus is teaching in the synagogue that they just left here. The synagogue was a very public place. Simon’s house is a fairly private setting, at least while it’s just the boys and Simon’s mom, now healed so she could serve them. Once the word got out, however, Simon’s house became a very public place, with the “whole city” crowding the door. “In the morning, while it was still very dark” (wow, can you hear the Easter resurrection theme there? I want to keep going with, “Mary rose quietly and made her way to the place where they had buried Jesus) ... but here, Jesus sneaks off to a deserted (i.e. very private) place. And finally, we’re back in Galilee doing the synagogue circuit, a very public setting. Private; public; private; public. No wonder we had whiplash!

Ok, so we’ve begun to make some sense out of the way Mark has put all of this together, now how does that help us to be not-so-confused disciples? There are several really interesting lessons that we can derive from this passage. To begin, the private-public pattern gives us a clue

not only about how Jesus saw his role in serving but also about his need for physical and spiritual recovery. We sometimes (often?) worry if we're not "out there" full blast, max throttle, all the time with our faith. This episode reveals clearly that Jesus did the very public thing, but also used more private time for deeper connections. Perhaps at this stage of his ministry it was only in the private places that Jesus could "touch the hand" of a woman sick with fever and not be shunned for being now unclean himself.

A further point that emerges is that Jesus spends time alone in prayer. Now there's a model for our own spiritual growth and well-being. If the one who was One with God needed a quiet time/place to listen for what God had to say, then surely we need it more! Communal prayer, as we gather for worship, is right and good and pleasing to God, but there is also a need for us to find that quiet space where we are alone with God, listening for the "still, small voice." The disciples don't seem to have caught on yet, for they are not yet willing to interrupt a popular tour with retreat and prayer. They looked for him (literally, "chased him down" – the image of kids calling, "Mom...", "Mom!" comes to mind) when they couldn't find him and whined incredulously, "everyone is searching for you!" (again, the voice of the four-year-old comes through, "we couldn't find you!")

Jesus' response to them provides yet another insight into his understanding of his role, to minister to those who have not yet heard rather than to return to the applause of former ministries. "Let's move on to other towns ...", he tells them, jostling them out of their comfort zone and heralding the task that lay before him and them, proclaiming the message. What lessons the church could learn from that one understanding. Instead of longing for the "glory days", the "good old days" of self-serving and self-stroking, the church being called to experiment with new and challenging ministries – what a radical gospel message! "You mean the church isn't about us?!" – now there's a message that on the one hand could get a minister into a whole lot of trouble but on the other hand could help the church to blossom and grow!

Finally, there's the somewhat confusing issue of "not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew him." Jesus, especially in Mark's gospel, often sought to silence those who would publicize his name and his deeds. He imposed this silence on demons, on those whom he healed, and even on his disciples. The confusion clears as we remember that for Mark the confession of Jesus that is complete and acceptable is at the cross (15:39). The confession of only one person who takes up the cross to follow Jesus in loving service means more than the compliments of one thousand pushing and shoving in Galilee.

No wonder the disciples were confused – so many new and radical understandings to grasp in such a short, whirlwind time! We are blessed by God that we have the opportunity to replay the events, to take the quiet alone moments, to absorb at our own pace the depth and significance of the message of reconciliation and forgiveness that Jesus proclaimed. Mix the quiet private times in with the noisy public times; celebrate and practice your faith walking humbly and doing justice, confessing with both your voice and your actions your faith in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.