

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 9:30-37

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This story is a combination of the second passion prophecy and of the conflict story between Jesus and the disciples about how to regard status and how one gets to be a leader. The passion prophecy is told in the spirit of factual description. There is no self-pity; there is no bitterness or anger at those who will cause his suffering and death. It is simply a statement of fact. The lack of understanding of the disciples is told in a way that is wholly sympathetic. They didn't understand what Jesus was saying and they were afraid to ask. This is an inside view of the feelings and responses of the disciples that everyone in the audience could identify with. In telling the story, make it possible for your listeners to join with the disciples in being utterly amazed and of not understanding what it is that Jesus is saying and why his execution would be inevitable or necessary.

The discussion of their arguing about who is the greatest is at one level funny. Jesus asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" and they are like children who don't want to tell their parents what they had done or what they were talking about. So they don't tell him; rather, he intuits what it is. What is described is their embarrassment. I think the storyteller is amused: "For on the way they argued with one another about who is the greatest."

This is one in a series of stories in which Jesus disagrees with the disciples and teaches them something by demonstration. This is not the same level of conflict between Jesus and his disciples as is present in other stories: the passion prophecy when Peter rebuked him; an exorcist who they rebuke; their rebuke of parents bringing children to Jesus. The climax of these conflict stories is the anointing at Bethany in which Judas was so angry at Jesus' confrontation with them that he betrayed him.

In this case, Jesus sits down and calls the twelve. Therefore, as the storyteller, gather your audience as the twelve around you and if possible sit down as you talk to them. You may even want to pick up a child put your arm around the child on your lap as you tell the story. Or you could do that in your imagination: imagine a little child who is part of your family and then take her in your arms as you say, "Whoever welcomes one such child as this welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not just me but the one who sent me." It's a tender, heart-warming story about the kingdom of God and about greatness. Greatness is to welcome a child.

This story provides the mandate for children's ministries throughout the centuries. It is the example that has motivated the teaching of children for 2000 years. In its original context it was a great shock. There are few stories about warmth toward children in the tradition of Israel. Greatness for men was associated with victory in battle and politics, not with caring for children. This is a reversal of expectations and a new idea in the tradition of Israel.