

November 3, 2012

Matthew 16-18; Mark 8-9; Luke 9, 17

My name is Nancy Davies, I am the Director of Ministry Environments at CCC. This is the segment for November 3 which covers portions of Mark 8 and 9, Matthew 16 and 17, Matthew 18 and Luke 17 and 18.

The setting of our reading today is in Caesarea Philippi, a long way from Jerusalem and two day's walk north of the Sea of Galilee, on the slopes of Mount Hermon, by the River Jordan. Why did Jesus take the disciples all that way, to have this conversation? This passage is the turning point of Mark's gospel, a mountain slope experience to give the disciples a view not only back through the gospel but on to the final confrontation Jesus will face in Jerusalem. Everything gets more difficult from this point forward.

Perhaps Jesus takes the disciples away from the normal flow of crowds and insists on secrecy as he reveals his Kingdom-mission is becoming more explicitly a Messiah-mission. He must do what he has to do swiftly and secretly. Look back at the last section of yesterday's reading telling the story of Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida. Mark has put together the story of the blind man and of the disciples gaining their insight to emphasize what is happening. In both stories, Jesus removes the participants from their normal surroundings, develops the story around a two stage process of reaching sight or understanding and ends with a warning of the need for secrecy.

We open our reading with the question, "Who do the people say that the Son of Man is? The people see Jesus but they think he is just a prophet; not the meek and mild Jesus we like to envision, but a prophet similar to John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah-fearless men of God who spoke out against evil and injustice and brought hope to God's suffering people.

Jesus asks the question again but now directly facing the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ, (Messiah)." It is as if their vision has finally been corrected as they speak the word, Messiah. All that has happened is taking shape to show that Jesus is the anointed King of Israel; they had found the king that were longing for. The disciples would not fully understand the Kingdom that Jesus was bringing until after his resurrection but they have transitioned from Jesus announcing the Kingdom of God, to Jesus as God's anointed King.

The question "Who do you say I am?" must be answered by all. Do you think of Christ as simply a great human teacher? Or a super-hero able to use his power to fix all that is wrong in our world? Or do you claim Jesus as your Messiah King, willing to follow him in his risky business of bringing justice and mercy to a broken world? Caesarea Philippi was a very "religious" place. There was a huge white marble temple dedicated to Caesar, it was reputed to be the birthplace of the god Pan, the most famous fertility god of the pagan world, the god of nature. It was a religious crossroads, similar to our culture today. The greatest danger that Christianity will ever face is from those who take a little from this religion and a little from that creed and some ideas from another ethical system over there, mix them all with Christianity and say here is the way to God. Our sinful hearts run

towards this approach to belief but against the backdrop of manmade religion, Jesus has staked His claim to be the Savior, Messiah-King, the one who brings truth and forgiveness. If you are unsure of your answer to "Who do you say I am?" Take time today to consider your commitment to Christ. This is the most significant question a person can ever ask.

Immediately after Peter's disclosure, Jesus starts to talk to the disciples, for the first time, plainly about His death, about the fact that He is going to be killed and after three days rise from the dead. It doesn't appeal to them. Peter tries to keep Him from talking about such things and is rebuked by Jesus in very sharp language. Then Jesus says, "I tell you the truth. Some of you who are standing here with Me will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." There is a good deal of question about what Jesus actually meant by that. I think Jesus' words were fulfilled almost immediately, for just six days later Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him up on the Mount of Transfiguration, and there, to their utter amazement, they saw the curtain of reality peeled aside, and they were able to get just a glimpse of that greater reality that is always with us, but seldom have the opportunity to see. The two greatest figures of the Old Testament -- Moses the Law-giver and Elijah the greatest of prophets -- Moses who had been buried by God Himself, and Elijah, who never died, but was simply taken to heaven in a chariot, were talking about the most momentous event in the history of the universe, the event to which their whole lives had been directed, the death of Christ on the cross. Concerning Jesus' face and clothing glowing white with light, theologian, Tom Wright explains, "this is a sign of Jesus being entirely caught up with, bathed in, the love, power and kingdom of God, so that it transforms his whole being with light, in the way that music transforms words that are sung. This is the sign that Jesus is not just indulging in fantasies about God's kingdom, but that he is speaking and doing the truth. It's the sign that he is indeed the true prophet, the true Messiah." (Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, page 116).

The next section I want to highlight is the reference to children when Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." What we do to and with our children are an indication of what we think about the world, God and ourselves. In the world of Jesus, children were seen as only half-human until they had reached puberty. Girls in particular suffered, were thrown away at birth or sold at an early age. I surmise that the 'child' in this story was a young girl, to drive home the point Jesus was making that the weakest, most vulnerable, least significant human you can think of as the clearest possible sign to what the kingdom of God will be like. God's Kingdom won't be about the fittest, most powerful, strongest, fastest, loudest people getting ahead of everyone else. On the contrary and Jesus must have known what the disciples were thinking when they asked about who would be first. Jesus turns their thoughts upside-down by calling out a shy, vulnerable, unsure, but trusting and ready to listen, to be loved and love, to learn and grow child. He says, this is what true greatness is like--go and learn about it. Learn to look at life from the other end of the telescope--open your eyes to see that becoming like children is central to growing in grace and wisdom.

Jesus goes on to give a warning about exploiting 'little ones', not only children but the vulnerable, powerless, at risk people in our world. He gives an exaggerated punishment

example to give weight to his point. The people we don't like to 'see' in society, the ones that are weak and vulnerable at times (the sick, physically disabled, elderly, women-in some cultures, refugees) matter. They are worth going after even though 99 members of the flock are safe.

Lastly, forgiveness in our relationships with one another is talked about by Jesus. The Christian life is born in forgiveness and it has to characterize us through all our relationships. Peter found it hard to forgive and we are no different. Jesus basically told Peter to stop counting! We are forgiven people, we ought to be able to summon the motivation and the power to forgive others. Jesus also admonishes us to not carry resentment which carries severe spiritual consequences. If we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven.

That is all for today. Remember to ask God to quicken your mind each day as you read from his word.