

## **Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel**

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Received September 13, 2021

### **TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 9:30–37. This text contains a very specific and important teaching on the source of greatness in the Kingdom of God. It also contains an enduring caution on the destructive effects of competition and self-seeking in the life of the Church. Let's study this passage in greater detail to understand how it can help us better live our lives as disciples who seek to be great in the eyes of God.

The passage begins with Jesus instructing the disciples on His Passion, Death and Resurrection that will take place in Jerusalem. In response to our Lord's teaching we are told that the disciples failed to understand and were afraid to ask him anything. That is an intriguing response to our Lord's teaching and worthy of our study. The failure to understand is probably not in regards to what Jesus will experience, as this is the second time that our Lord has informed them of His pending Suffering, Death, and Resurrection. Rather, the failure to understand most likely refers to the disciples' inability to comprehend the practical implications of our Lord's Passion for their own lives. The Passion of Jesus is not meant to be something our Lord experiences as everyone else watches. The Passion of Jesus is something we are meant to live out as we follow Him in His sacrificial and selfless love for others. The disciples did not understand how they might be called to follow in that way, and so we see their incomprehension manifesting itself in bickering and competing against each other.

The other interesting element we are told is that the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus anything. Their fear takes on new meaning in light of their incomprehension and indicates that the disciples did not even want to know what the suffering of Jesus had to do with them. That is intentional ignorance. Jesus offered them privileged insights into discipleship, and they chose to not understand or apply those insights to their lives. Because of their failure to conform themselves to our Lord's death and resurrection, they may not be able to accept the challenges of faith that will come their way as Jesus enters Jerusalem and ascends the Cross of Calvary. Their intentional failure to seek understanding is offered to us as a negative example of discipleship. Such willful ignorance has actually caused them to become distanced from Jesus even as they accompany Him on the way to Jerusalem. The "way" is more than a geographical journey; it is actually the spiritual journey of each disciple.

This passage challenges us to consider how human weakness, fear of sacrifice, and complacency of faith can cause us to fail to understand the meaning of Jesus' passion for our lives as well. Disciples are people who constantly seek to understand the events of their lives through the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus so as to faithfully interpret and respond to those events. Oftentimes, however, we can fail to understand how the Death and Resurrection of Jesus has any meaning for the situations we face. In such moments, we are like the disciples. We can also find ourselves avoiding opportunities for faith enrichment, the Sacrament of Confession, and

discipleship formation because we don't want to even know how those experiences might affect us or challenge us.

*What event or experience most gives meaning to your life?*

*When is the message of Jesus difficult for you to understand?*

*Of the three most difficult situations you are now facing, how can the mystery of Jesus' Passion, Death, and Resurrection give you understanding, direction, and encouragement?*

*What ministry experiences (or Sacraments) do you avoid because you are uncomfortable or "afraid" of them?*

*In what area of your life do you find it most convenient not to ask questions of faith or seek better understanding of moral principles?*

*How can fear keep us from experiencing the consolation and friendship of Jesus?*

When Jesus and the disciples arrived at the house in Capernaum, our Lord asked them what they were arguing about on the way. We are then told that they were silent because their discussion was about who was the greatest. The use of the term "argue" indicates a hostile interaction rather than a respectful discussion. There are two important lessons Mark wants us to gain from this moment in the story. The first lesson concerns the way in which Jesus' suffering is perpetuated in the life of the Church. The Body of Christ, the Church, continues to suffer when its members argue and compete against one another in destructive pursuits for honor, privilege, and power. The fact that the disciples were now in the "house" at Capernaum connects their discussion with issues related to the house or Church experience of the first century (known as *domus ecclesiae*). Indeed, the Spirit of Christ always suffers when unhealthy dissensions and divisions arise in the Church and cause disharmony, alienation, humiliation, and hurt.

The second lesson concerns that envy which gives rise to competitions for greatness. According to the values of the world, great people are those who have power, wealth, influence, and the respect of others. When we allow these values to govern our lives as disciples, we end up comparing ourselves to those around us in order to see who is "greater". This concern with other people's accomplishments and status can lead us to put others down in an effort to make ourselves look better. It can also evoke sadness in us when we see another's success or good fortune. This attitude of envy is destructive to the individual Christian soul and to the Christian community as a whole. As disciples, our true dignity is found primarily in our relationship with Jesus Christ. What we own, what we do, and who we know should be relatively unimportant when compared with being a friend of Jesus. In moments of doubt or insecurity we tend to grasp for false assurances of our worth. Envy was disintegrating the disciples both in terms of their collective communion and their individual integrity.

As Christians who want to be faithful disciples of Jesus, we need to learn from the experience of these early followers of the Lord so as to overcome the mistakes they made. When members of the Church (the Body of Christ) argue and compete in destructive ways, we end up hurting the Spirit of Christ in our midst. Also, when disciples begin to base their security on anything other than their relationship with Jesus, we become susceptible to the erosive envy that focuses on other people's lives rather than the life to which Jesus calls us to live. It is natural to desire greatness rather than lowliness or powerlessness. Certainly this message had particular meaning for Mark's community as they were undergoing the first persecution of the Christian

Church in Rome. Undoubtedly they wanted to be “great” in a way that would allow them to avoid suffering and death rather than be vulnerable and faithful. It was tempting for Christians of the first century to seek false security when their faith was tested. It’s certainly true for us today as well.

*How does the Body of Christ, the Church, suffer today because of arguing and competing among its members?*

*Who in the world suffers most because some people desire to be better than everyone else?*

*How does the competition for greatness among members hurt a faith community?*

*For which false assurances of worth and security do people tend to grasp today?*

*How has your experience of envy been destructive to your personal happiness and your ability to rejoice in another’s good fortune?*

In response to the disciples’ errant topic of conversation, Jesus offers an authoritative teaching on the true nature of greatness within the Christian community. We know this message is offered as an authoritative instruction for the Church because our Lord “sits down” and assumes the formal role of a Teacher. Our Lord’s teaching has two aspects to it. The first aspect concerns a redefinition of greatness. Our Lord replaces the secular criteria of greatness (stated above) with that of humble service. Great people in the time of Jesus were served by others and given the first places of honor at gatherings. Jesus tells the disciples that the Christian community is to value and esteem those who serve rather than those who are served and to honor those who assume the last place rather than those who seek the first place. This message is as challenging today as it was for the people of Jesus’ time. Our secular culture tells us that greatness is found in our positions, possessions, and persons with whom we associate. Such secular pursuits are to be specifically identified and intentionally rejected when they infiltrate and infect the life of the Church. We must consciously seek to esteem and honor those who assume positions of service and humility.

The second aspect of greatness concerns the ability to receive one who is like a child in the name of Jesus. This aspect of greatness requires some explanation in order to fully understand the challenge it presents to us as disciples. When Jesus placed a child in the center of the group and embraced the child, our Lord was demonstrating that a simple and powerless individual (a child) is worthy of acceptance, respect, and love. Association with children in the time of Jesus could not contribute anything towards an individual’s worldly greatness. Children were powerless and had little social standing in the adult world. For this reason, ancient Roman authors provided little information about children prior to adolescence. Jesus is teaching the disciples that real greatness is in the ability to receive Him when they receive one such as a child (powerless and insignificant in terms of social status).

Christian servants can minister and serve others because they have the eyes of faith that allow them to see the presence of Christ in the least of His brothers and sisters. That ability to see Christ in others, especially the powerless, vulnerable, and those lacking social status, is a hallmark of a truly great disciple. It is this faithful recognition of Jesus in others that distinguishes a Christian disciple from a mere social worker.

*Who do you think is an example of Christian greatness according to the teaching of Jesus*

*in this passage?*

*How can a faith community recognize and esteem people who serve others?*

*How can secular values of greatness hurt the Church today?*

*Who are the simple and powerless ones in your midst in whom you can serve the presence of Jesus?*

*When is it difficult for you to recognize the presence of Jesus in another person?*

*What can help you develop the eyes of faith that recognize the presence of Christ in others?*

Finally, let us take a moment to reflect on these words by St. Thomas Aquinas:

There is in man something great, which he possesses through the gift of God; and something defective, which accrues to him through the weakness of nature. Accordingly magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God: thus if his soul is endowed with great virtue, magnanimity makes him tend to perfect works of virtue; and the same is to be said of the use of any other good, such as science or external fortune. On the other hand, humility makes a man think little of himself in consideration of his own deficiency.<sup>[1]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 129, a. 3, ad 4