

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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JUNE 28, 2009



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Luke 9:37-56

"Down In The Valley"

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, his face shone from being in the presence of the LORD. But the glow disappeared when he saw what was going on in the valley – the “people of God” under the leadership of Aaron the priest were dancing around a golden calf! In disgust, Moses threw the stone tablets of the Law on the ground and broke them in pieces; and for the next 40 days prayed that the LORD would not carry out his threat to destroy the people he called a “crooked generation.”

So when Jesus descends from the mount of Transfiguration, he finds his disciples in the valley in utter chaos. He has been gone perhaps a day, and his words when he descends sound as exasperated as anything he ever said to his followers: *“O unbelieving and perverse generation! How long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”*

1) *Failure in the Valley*

What had gone wrong? First, the remaining nine members of the Twelve, apart from Peter, James and John who had accompanied Jesus up the mountain, had been unable to deal with the evil spirit that was afflicting a young boy. His father was in despair. Jesus was exasperated. Only weeks earlier he had sent the Twelve out around Galilee with his authority and power to cast out demons and heal the sick, and by all accounts they had succeeded in their first mission without him.

Now they couldn’t do it any more. What’s the point of training leaders if they forget how to lead? What had happened to their faith? Was this what happened when he was gone for *one day*?

Jesus of course casts out the demon, restores the boy to his father, and everyone *“marvels at the greatness of God... and what Jesus did.”* But before the crowds have finished marveling, the Twelve are embroiled in a private argument. About what, you might ask? Why nobody could perform the exorcism? Why they had lost the power and authority Jesus gave them? No – *“they argued over who would be the greatest!”* For a moment, you wonder if words failed Jesus! Luke tells us this same argument broke out at the end of the Last Supper! So Jesus does something to get the Twelve’s attention: he draws to him a young child, places him *“at his side”* in the place of honor, and says *“here is an example for you: this child, who has no honor, no status, no position. “Greatness” in my kingdom is being like this. Welcome the lowly, and forget about our own ‘status.’”*

The powerful image of this child is almost lost on us – in our culture, we value children highly, we dote on them, we provide them with anything and everything, we protect them fiercely from any perceived threat. In the 1st century, a child had no status, and little value, especially in Greco-Roman culture – perhaps because less than half of

them made it to their 5th birthday. Jews thought children “a blessing,” but had none of the sentimental attachment to them that arose in our culture only a couple of hundred years ago. So for Jesus to use a child as an example was to turn their social order upside down!

But the disciples who want to be “the greatest” are not done yet. If “self” was their “golden calf,” they had more idols, not least who was in “*their group*” and who was not. So John, who had been with Jesus on the mountain and “seen his glory,” nonetheless proudly tells Jesus that “*we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.*” Not one of us! Even though he was ministering “in Jesus’ name,” he is “not one of us”! Jesus of course sees this as nonsense: the man is “for us” and not against us! And a few days later, as Jesus and the Twelve head south through Samaria, and discover that they are “unwelcome Jews,” James and John (both fresh from the mountain) want to “*call down fire and destroy*” the Samaritan village! For this malice they receive what Jesus normally uses when confronting demons – a “*rebuke.*”

One more thing in the valley. Jesus again tells them that he will soon be “*delivered* (or perhaps even “*betrayed*”) *into the hands of men.*” He is telling them again that his glory and his greatness are tied into his suffering and death. He even says “*listen carefully,*” but they do not. They don’t understand, they can’t grasp his point, they don’t make the connection, and they are afraid to even ask him about it. They are in a fog of fear and failure. The valley of discipleship looks grim at this point.

What is the answer to this? The Twelve and others still have much to learn. Jesus has now set out “*resolutely*” for Jerusalem, where his “*exodus*” will be completed, as he had discussed with Moses and Elijah on the

Mount of Transfiguration. He knows where he is going, and what it will take on his part to rescue even his closest followers from their failure to perform, their failure to believe, their failure to ask for wisdom, their ambition, their exclusivity, their vindictiveness. It will take his rejection, his betrayal by one of them, his arrest and trial and flogging and crucifixion, his being raised on the third day, before they can truly become the spiritual leaders of his new community that he has called them to be.

They were the first and the best, they had left everything to follow him, they were his leaders; but they did not grasp what Jesus was about. They had learned very little from watching him welcome “the poor” and “sinners” into his community; they were still bound up by concepts of honor and status and shame. They were, simply, *too proud of being “The Twelve”* to be of much use to Jesus at this point. “*How long shall I put up with you?*” he asks.

2) *Battles Are Fought In The Valley*

What does it all mean? That inspiration may come from experiences on the mountain, but the battles of discipleship have to be fought out in the valley. This is where we spend most of our time; and this is where we have to learn to *live*. “Mountain-top experiences” are rare and fleeting; they can be life-changing, but the battles still have to be fought down in the valley.

Some of you know exactly what that means. Worship, Bible Study groups, prayer groups, going to conferences, singing, the warmth and friendship of the people in the church – they may be small but nonetheless very welcome weekly “*mountain-sides,*” but the hard work of Christian discipleship starts on Monday (or maybe Sunday on the way home in the car): family, children, work, health,

money, relationships. And many of us feel too much like failures in the valley!

The valley is where people who are supposed to be leaders don't lead. They are called and accept the call and are trained and given authority, but they seem to have no idea what they are doing. So people who need leaders to lead are left frustrated, half-crazy, because "the system" doesn't work! Where are the grown-ups when you need them? Can anyone make decisions? Where are the leaders? In a corporation, in an office, in a government department, in a school system; even in a family, even in a church - where are the leaders? Can't anyone do what they are supposed to do?

The valley is where people want to be thought well of, to be regarded as "great." If there is one idolatry that persists through the ages, it is the worship of *self*. O, to be sure, what looks like overweening pride may be deep insecurity: the kind shown by people who can never admit they are wrong, who insist that they have no problems but everyone around them does; people who cannot appear "weak," people who have never said "I'm sorry" and really meant it.

The valley is where fear and suspicion of "outsiders" and strangers still imprisons people. They cannot accept anyone who is "other" as truly being "on our side," because they are not "one of us." Others may be trying to do exactly what we are trying to do, and even be doing it better, but we don't like them or accept them because they are not "like us." Maybe they are newcomers to our town or our church or our nation; that's all it takes. But perhaps they have much to teach us about family and work and faith! The valley is where retribution is still the name of the game: if "they" don't welcome us, maybe we will order up some high explosives and get rid of them!

This is the culture of faithlessness and unbelief and self-promotion that Jesus came to transform. It would take him "*emptying himself of his glory, making himself nothing... taking the form of a servant, humbling himself, being obedient to death, even death on a cross*" - at least that's how Paul summarized Jesus' "descent" from glory to deliver his people (Philippians 2). And that was to be the pattern of discipleship for the people who embraced his deliverance, who knew that he was right and that the habits they had learned in the valley were wrong.

You and I, who live occasionally on the mountain, but every day in the valley, still have much to learn here. The valley's "ethics" of unfaithfulness (or should we call it infidelity?), incompetence, ignorance, self-centeredness, exclusivity, retribution, are not the path to human flourishing for us, for our families, for our workplaces, for our communities, for our churches. The path that follows Jesus is about asking for help, seeking wisdom, taking responsibility, accepting the lower place, welcoming the stranger, avoiding conflict, owning our failures. It is about the blood that Jesus spilt to deal with our "wanting to be the greatest." It is about embracing the forgiveness of sins that he offers to those who admit they need it.

It is not true that "we are ok" and that all our troubles are "someone else's fault." It is true that Jesus came to bear the burden of guilt and accusation and self-justification that too many of us drag around the valley every day; to bear it and to deliver us from it, so that we can become the joyful, loving, giving, faithful people who are welcome anywhere - especially as his disciples.

The battles have to be won in the valley. Lord be with us, and deliver us from the giants of unbelief and self-assertion, and the idols of gold and of self, that lurk here;

deliver us by your resolute march to the
cross on our behalf.

Let us pray...