

Seeing things: Mark 9:30-37

Jesus sees something the disciples do not even know they are missing.

by [Mary Hinkle Shore](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

"Start seeing motorcycles," said the bumper sticker. I didn't know I *wasn't* seeing motorcycles, I thought, then realized that that was the point. How do you begin to see something you didn't know you were missing?

"Start seeing the resurrection," says Jesus, as he walks with the disciples to Jerusalem. He is teaching them about his death and resurrection, but they don't understand. They are confused and reluctant to ask for clarification. Perhaps they're afraid of looking stupid again. After all, the last time they thought they understood what Jesus was talking about, he was warning them about the Pharisees and Herod, and they were thinking about bread (Mark 8:14-21). Oops. Or maybe they are frightened into silence by the words *betrayed* and *killed*. Whatever the cause of their fear, they do not respond to Jesus when he describes the end of their journey.

Instead, as the walk progresses, the disciples find their way into a discussion about which of them is the greatest. They are graduate students comparing GRE scores. They are ministers discussing how many they worship each week, as in "We worship about 450 at both services." They are anyone who has ever written a memo containing the words "measurable outcomes." Which of the disciples is the star pupil? Who is the greatest?

It is easy to portray the disciples as self-involved here, but maybe that is unfair. What if the outcome they were trying to measure was faithfulness to their teacher? What if they were arguing about who really understood Jesus, including what Jesus was saying about his death? We know they were confused by his passion predictions. We know, too, that they are not the only followers to wonder what exactly is required of one who seeks to remain faithful to Jesus. Maybe the conversation about greatness grew out of a conversation about what it really meant for them to stay beside Jesus all the way to Jerusalem.

The way of the cross is no less confounding or frightening today. Because of this, it is fashionable in some circles to speak of Christianity as a set of skills that one learns to practice, the way one learns the skills necessary to be a woodworker or a research chemist. New pastors are advised to find the masters of Christianity in their parish and apprentice themselves to these giants of Christian practice. And if we are going to apprentice ourselves to a master, we must learn who is the greatest.

Which brings us back to the disciples on the road. Unfortunately, inside the house in Capernaum, Jesus is unimpressed by the disciples' tidy argument about their need to know who is the greatest. He looks around for help to make his point. He sits down, calls his pupils to sit around him and begins to teach by bringing a child into the group. We don't know if the child was a girl or a boy. (The Greek word for child is gender neutral.) The vocabulary echoes the culture's view of children. To almost all adults, and certainly to adult male disciples focused on their alpha male teacher and their measurable likeness to him, children were of no consequence. Children were invisible.

In Luke 7, a Pharisee is scandalized when Jesus allows a woman, a known sinner, to wash his feet and anoint them with ointment. Jesus asks him, "Do you see this woman?" Something similar is happening when Jesus stands a child up in the midst of his disciples, then takes the child in his arms the way Simeon had once embraced baby Jesus and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). The disciples want to know who is the best at following Jesus, and Jesus says, "Do you see this child?" As Pheme Perkins observes, "This example treats the child, who was socially invisible, as the stand-in for Jesus."

In one of Sue Grafton's mysteries, the murderer turns out to be a 60-year-old woman who is 30 pounds overweight. After the mystery is solved, the detective reflects that the woman nearly got away with murder simply because no one would remember seeing someone like her. Nothing about her made her noticeable. She was, for all practical purposes, invisible.

So it was with a child in antiquity. Jesus sees something the disciples do not even know they are missing.

This gospel text's bumper sticker might be, "Start seeing the invisible." Start seeing the invisible, not because it is virtuous to do so, not so that we can congratulate

ourselves on being the greatest at seeing. Start seeing the invisible because to receive the invisible One is to receive Jesus, and to receive Jesus is to receive the One who sent him.

Where is the invisible Jesus who will teach you the way of the cross? Will you learn to pray from the “masters,” the saints in your community, the old faithful ones? Probably you will. But there is also that panicked woman in the ICU waiting room who has never prayed, and who teaches you to pray when she clenches her hands to her forehead and says, “God, please!” Do you see her?

You may learn to preach from the tapes of great preachers, and refine your theology by reading the writings of seminary professors. But a teenager near you could be a preacher too, one with a talent for testimony that you’ve never seen. The most solid sacramental theology you hear this week may come from the five-year-old who tells you she thinks she is ready to receive communion because, simply, “I can eat.” If you see them, you see Jesus.