

Ordinary 25B (Mark 9:30-37)

This week's Gospel may be the second Passion prediction, but being told that Jesus will be killed is no easier on the second hearing. Maybe the disciples don't ask questions because they're afraid it could be true.

by [Karoline M. Lewis](#) in the [September 16, 2015](#) issue

Typical, isn't it? That we remain silent when we do not understand something. That in moments when it is clear we have no idea what has been said or what is going on, we are unwilling to ask for clarification or further explanation.

Why? What are the disciples afraid of? What are we afraid of?

When we don't comprehend something, we tend to figure out all kinds of ways to assuage our discomfort. We avoid asking questions so as not to appear stupid. We don't want to expose our lack of knowledge, and so we say nothing at all. We disagree, but we dread disappointment and stay mute. It's a vulnerable place, not knowing. If we don't get it, this must have something to do with our failure and incompetence.

But what the disciples hear in this week's Gospel reading is not your usual summary of information. It may be the second Passion prediction in Mark, but being told that Jesus will be betrayed and killed and then rise again is likely no easier on the second hearing. Maybe the disciples don't ask questions because they are afraid that it could be true. The first time Jesus said it, they could sort of brush it off as something he said in passing. Now he's saying it again. And look what happened to Peter when he tried to deny the truth! The disciples are afraid.

The thing is, when you start asking questions, you may get answers that you do not want to hear or are not ready to hear. When you start asking questions, you are engaging in dialogue—and dialogue is a rather unpredictable affair. It's easier to

stay silent, because monologue is a much safer place to be.

Monologue seems to be the communication mode of choice these days when it comes to faith. Rather than an act of conversation, faith has become an act of coercion. It seems to demand immediate acceptance, with little room for ambiguity. The way people talk about faith is less about the mysteries of faith and more about the mastery of convictions and doctrines and beliefs.

Mark doesn't see faith this way. The book's beginnings should tip us off that the creaturely comforts we want from our faith structures don't really work when it comes to God. Mark's Gospel immediately upends our penchant for controlling God by means of ritual, church polity, denominational loyalty, confessions, and creeds. God tears through the heavens, rips apart the temple curtain—because if God didn't, we would continue to insist that God exists in comprehensible and accessible categories.

This is a critical point in Mark and a critical point for the disciples. There's not much time left before the events of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion will begin to unfold. And it seems unlikely that things will make more sense in that moment than here in chapter 9. This is the time for questions, the time for conversation, the time for hearing the truth. Once you enter into the events of the truth, the truth is harder to see or hear. The most meaningful moments of vulnerability should come in the midst of truth—yet this is often when we shut down. We can't handle the truth.

So we pretend that to investigate truth's many meanings will lead to our theology going awry—rather than to it being engaged in healthy complication. When you start asking questions, you start moving closer to the truth. But the truth can be difficult to hear. We are quite proficient in avoiding it, especially when it comes to the challenges of faith.

"Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters," writes Margaret Wheatley. This is what's at stake for the disciples after this second Passion prediction, and for us who tend too quickly to "solve" faith rather than seek out its possibilities. Starting conversations takes courage. You do not know where the conversation will end up. You might not like the results. The conversation may reveal what you stand for—who you are, your very truth.

Then what? What do you do when the truth of your faith is out there for all the world to see? What might happen when people see what's at stake for you, what you are

willing to stand up for? Things might change. Relationships might change. Once you start asking questions, there's no going back—which is why it is easier to stay silent. Then you don't have to negotiate change, or navigate new levels of meaning in interactions that used to be comfortably predictable.

No wonder the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus questions. What might they see if they did? They would see Jesus in a different way, and they might not like what they saw. Therein lies the risk, the fear of their own betrayal. They would see one another differently, too. Their relationships might now be put to the test: Who will stay and who will go? On whom can you rely, and who will betray?

And they would be forced to see themselves in a new light, a radical reinterpretation of self. What kind of follower of Jesus am I? Can I be the disciple that he needs me to be, that my friends need me to be? Am I capable of following and living the truth of Jesus' passion? Or has my silence already convicted me of my own potential for unfaithfulness?

The courage to ask is a mark of discipleship.