

The disciples and us (Mark 9:30-37)

Poor disciples. They rarely miss an opportunity to make a mess.

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Earlier this year I offered our congregation a five-session study of the Bible. The focus was on what the Bible is, where it came from, who wrote it, and how it came down to us in multiple English language versions. It was a lot of work. It was also the most fun I've had with the Bible in a long time. It awakened my curiosity about this book that I'd come to take for granted.

Since then my preaching often includes expression of my newfound enthusiasm and appreciation for our holy book. I'm not sure how well it communicates. It's kind of like trying to urge your friends to see a movie that blew your mind or to read a book that broke your heart. The excitement of a newfound passion is hard to express without its sounding like a sales pitch. Which usually just generates resistance in the very person I so badly want to give my latest favorite a try.

Still, I can't help myself. Things I've seen a hundred times before generate new questions. For example, I am fascinated by how often the Bible tells on the disciples. How it exposes their ignorance, their cluelessness, and their leaps before looking. If the goal of his gospel is to portray the disciples as heroic saints worthy of our praise and adulation, Mark misses the mark. Matthew and Luke follow suit, as does John in his own way.

Rather than perfect examples of faithfulness, Peter, James, John, and company are people who routinely get it wrong. They are certainly capable of doing well, and there are examples proving just that. But they also fail often. And Mark shows us each misstep, each slip, each fall.

In Mark 8 we witness Peter instantly going from making the honor roll to being named Satan. He correctly identifies Jesus as Messiah, then gets rebuked for telling Jesus that his version of what that means is all wrong. And in Mark 9, when Jesus continues to reveal the hard road ahead, the disciples are caught arguing over who is suited to take second chair in the coming kingdom of God.

It must have been mortifying to hear Jesus ask what their conversation was about. While Jesus is pouring his heart out to them, they are working on establishing the first patriarchy in church history. Poor disciples. They rarely miss an opportunity to make a mess.

To be fair, they are figuring it out as they go. Flying by the seat of their pants. And every day witnessing a marvel, a miracle, another reason to take a deeper look at Jesus. Every day hearing a story that reveals something unexpected about where they are heading and what to expect when they arrive. Some of it is thrilling to consider, some of it terrifying. Getting to know Jesus day by day, story by story, mile by mile.

Which makes me reconsider. The disciples may not be perfect examples of faithfulness. But they are good examples of human beings who try to be faithful. That mix of the right step and the wrong, the good and the bad, the following and the wandering. Mark gives us fully human disciples to observe. We celebrate and try to replicate them at their best. We hope to learn from their mistakes. And we take heart in the realization that Jesus calls such flawed people, such human beings, to walk with him.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that I can find myself in it. In this case, in the disciples. Weak, willful, wayward me. And I can assure my congregation that they can find themselves there too. Certainly capable of running away when called. But just as capable of staying the course. Just as they are, always and altogether welcomed by Jesus into the company of disciples.