

Psalm 1:1-3
Mark 9:30-37

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CHOOSING YOUR LEGACY

*"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*

Karl Menninger reflected:

In the Louvre there is a life-sized statue of a Greek athlete called The Gladiator. Admiring it one day, I noticed a group of shabbily-dressed French boys accompanied by their teacher. They were all blind. Whenever they stood before some piece of sculpture, the teacher took each lad, guided his fingers over it, and carefully described its appearance. There was one small fellow whom he lifted up to "The Gladiator." He was a thin, spindly-legged child reaching out to embrace this likeness in marble of perfect physical manhood.

I have often thought of that as a parable. We all must choose some "Gladiator," the measure not only of physical manhood but also full-orbed personality at its highest and best. For the Christian it is Christ. We look at him and learn what it means to be human, mature, full grown, and perfect.

Chapter 9 of Mark's Gospel is the hinge pin of the gospel's story. It's about choosing God in Christ over self-reliance. The preceding chapters have unfolded the ministry of Jesus, which in Mark focuses particularly on the actions of Jesus, especially his miracles, and far less than the other gospels on his teachings. Chapter 9 reveals the supreme credentialing moment of this mysterious and utterly different teacher and servant of God, Jesus, whom the disciples, as we centuries later, are still trying to unravel.

High on a mountain north of Galilee, Jesus' whole appearance is transfigured before James, John and Peter, the only disciples that Jesus has taken with him. Then in a stunning vision, Moses and Elijah emerge from the deep past to talk with Jesus, Moses representing the law, while Elijah embodies the long tradition of Hebrew prophets. It is as though, in Jesus, all the hope of God in humanity comes to fruition. Suddenly a cloud overlays the mountain, and reminiscent of Moses on Mt. Sinai, God speaks out of the

cloud, saying “This is *my* Son, the Beloved; listen to *him*.” Now Jesus is alone with just the three terrified disciples. It is the pinnacle of accreditation. Only three times in Mark’s Gospel is Jesus called “Son” of God. The first occurs very early, in Chapter 1 at his baptism where, like here, the voice of God speaks from heaven. The third is at the end of the story, when a gentile centurion looks at Jesus on the cross and says, “Truly this man was God’s son.” The second is here, at the precise center of the gospel. Jesus is the one in whom God invests absolute confidence. He is *the one* to follow.

On his way down the mountain Jesus insists to his trio of companions that they reveal nothing of what they have seen. They reunite with other disciples at a village where the other disciples have been unable to heal an epileptic boy. So Jesus, seriously irritated at his disciples, heals the boy. A few days later Jesus and his disciples arrive at Capernaum, Jesus’ home, once again arriving as secretly as they can. Jesus wants nothing to detract from his mission, no public clamor, no adulation, no wide eyed thrill seeking groupies. In fact, on the way he tells the disciples what that mission is, to their utter consternation and confusion: he is to be betrayed, to be handed over to authorities, to be killed, and three days later to be given an irreversible flood of new life—which Jesus will then have authority to share with all who trust in him and seek to follow him. This is to be his legacy.

What prompts this stunning announcement is a squabble that erupts on their trek south through Galilee. The disciples, some of whom had cowered in terrified awe on the mountain top while others were botching the healing of the boy, are now vying for top dog, bragging about who’s the best, who’s going to leave the most enduring legacy.

So Jesus brings them all up short. “This is how the truly faithful will receive me,” he says, and he reaches for a child, sets it first in the midst of them, then lifts the child to his knee, saying, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”

Children were not perceived in Jesus’ day as they are now. Beyond the family they were unimportant. They were not mature adults and therefore had nothing to offer toward the *ideal*. The child, in this context, is not a symbol of innocence—that is our modern symbol—but a symbol of vulnerability and powerlessness. Jesus’ lesson, is not about imitating children, but about *receiving those who have the status of* children—the unimportant, the powerless. It stands in direct contrast to the bickering of the disciples about who was to be rewarded as “the greatest.” Jesus wants to revise our skewed perceptions of what’s important, wants us to welcome those who have no meaningful place. There is a massive irony at play here. This same Jesus is going to be cast out and killed in Jerusalem, and he

knows it. Still, his example of how to live is as one who has no status, a child who, outside the family circle, is of no account. “Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me.” The contrast between Jesus and the disciples, between Jesus and us, is stunning.

Who we come to be, in terms of the mark we make upon the world—our legacy, has to do with choosing. Choice is the hallmark of our generation: compare a Wall-Mart Superstore today with upwards of 100,000 merchandise choices to the mom and pop corner store 50 years ago where the choices were in the hundreds. Or today’s 170 plus T.V. channels to perhaps three in the 1950s (and still we struggle to find something worth watching!). But these are not the choices that lead to legacy building. The ability to choose from myriad options has enthroned the self at the center of a private universe. I become the sovereign chooser of all I survey. But that’s very different from what Jesus means when he lifts a child into his arms as his example. Whoever welcomes this child, or one like him, who is the least, the powerless, “welcomes me.” To so choose is to abandon my own ability, intellect or means—to the ludicrous, because in choosing the way of the least, the powerless, I invite the power of God to displace my own, and to be made manifest through me.

Gary Zukav in his anthology called *Soul Stories*, tells of a conversation between two friends. The first says, “A dog with long hair and a dog with short hair are always fighting inside me, but I’m not worried. I know the one with the short hair will win.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked his friend.

“Because,” he replied, “I feed the one with the short hair.”

You have antagonists fighting inside of you. Your anger with your patience. Your greed with your generosity. Your convictions with the convictions of those close to you. Your expectations with the expectations of others. Your faith with your doubts. At some point each of us has to decide which ones gets fed. The disciples, bickering among themselves on the road back to Galilee, were committed obviously to themselves more than their Lord. Yet they still towed along, I suspect because something in him spoke to a lack, a hunger that they could not define. Does that sound familiar?

What will your legacy be? How will you be remembered? Who or what defines and shapes who you are? And how do you nourish or feed that goal? Each year as confirmation begins I give the young people a questionnaire to fill out. It has many of the standard personal info questions such as: what’s your email address?, what name do you like to be called by?, who’s your favorite band?, etc. And it asks: “If you could sit down face to face with God and ask one question, what would it be?” We spend a good

chunk of time using these questions as discussion starters. Then it asks, “Who do you most admire, who would you choose as a role model.” Sometimes it’s a family member, often a celebrity. Yet in the ten years or so that I’ve asked the question, with typically 12-18 confirmands a year, I can’t recall that anyone ever listed Jesus as their role model! Why is that, I wonder—even though the end state of confirmation is to pledge ourselves to God in Christ. These are our children, after all.

Glen Harris puts it well, when he writes: “Decisions for Christ, of course, cannot be limited to wholehearted promises to be virtuous, no matter how innocent or well intentioned those might be. Decisions for Christ are human decisions made by people trying to respond to the Spirit even when they are battered by the inner and outer devils of the human condition.” As Eugene Kennedy puts it, “There is bitter gall, as well as church–social lemonade, that must be swallowed by the person who chooses to live his life deeply and truthfully.”

I often think how the most challenging, and sometimes intractable challenges that we face in life are seldom the technical ones. We have an extraordinary inventive genius for figuring those out. The Bible, of course doesn’t address technical challenges directly, which is one of the reasons why so many reject it, because it appears impractical and irrelevant to much of life. What it does address consistently, is what, on our own, we find most difficult to fix, that is our *relational* problems: how to get along with each other. It shows us, through Jesus, first, how to live with God, who provides the model on which to build a legacy, how to live with each other, not just to get along but to build enduring monuments to love, caring and compassion. And, often most insidious, most troubling, most angst ridden—how to love ourselves.

Love of God, love of neighbor, love of self. I can’t think of a more noble or more enduring legacy. Can you? To be greeted by God with the embrace of “Well done good and faithful servant.” And to leave a hole among those from whom we depart, such that we are dearly missed. As Mark Twain put it, “Let us choose to live so that, when we die, even the undertaker will be sorry.”

Amen.