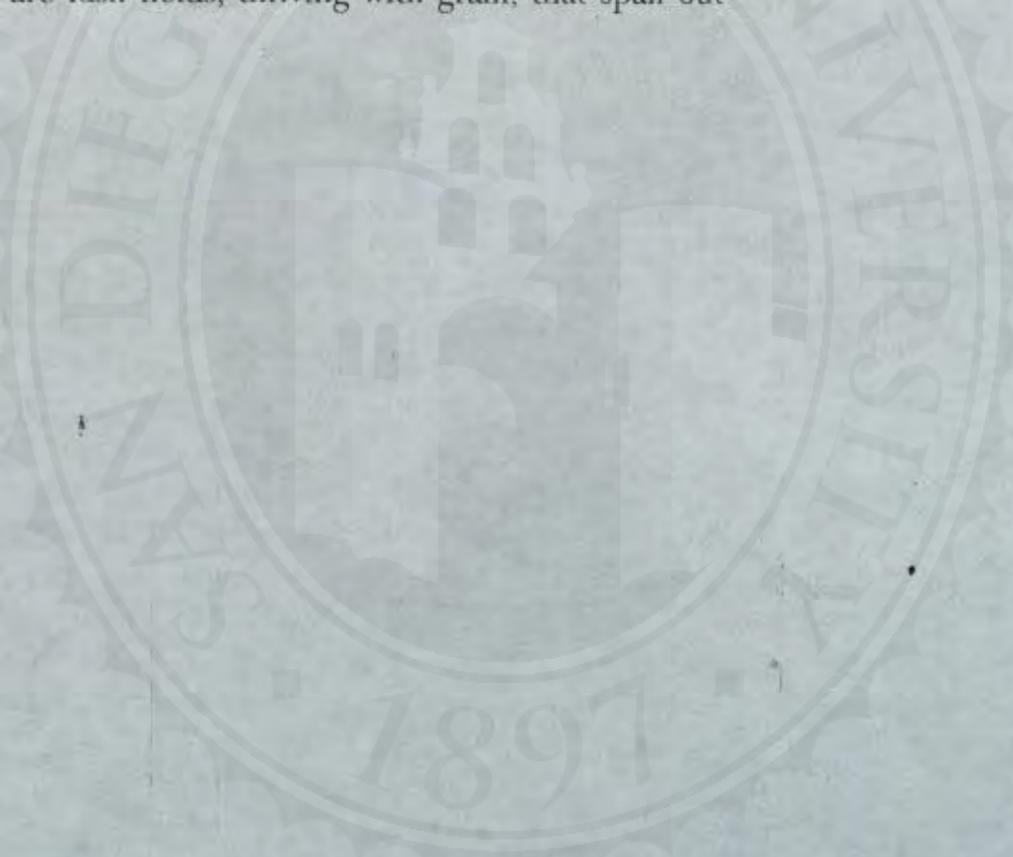


## HIDDEN SECRETS

## Mark 9:30-37

The Gospel texts for Pentecost seventeen and eighteen have a common setting. From Mark 9:33-50, it is evident the themes raised come from the same conversation in the same Capernaum house. It is possible that it is Peter's home, and that the child Jesus singles out (v. 36) is a progeny of the big fisherman. While some of this is justifiable speculation, it lends itself to a two-part series that might be entitled overall, *Family Discussions*.

There is a certain charm to the scene surrounding our text. Jesus and his companions are walking home to Capernaum. They are coming from northeastern Galilee that juts into Syria. They are going in a southerly direction toward the Sea of Galilee. In that locale there is a particularly placid enchantment to the countryside. There are lush fields, thriving with grain, that span out-



ward from the grey-green waters of the upper Jordan River. Olive trees line some of the country lanes and vineyards climb the rounded hills. Jesus and the twelve are returning home from an extensive visit to Caesarea Philippi. The Transfiguration took place only days beforehand. Some believe that happened on snow-crowned Mount Hermon thirty to thirty-five miles from the fishing fleet at Capernaum. Now they are stretching their legs over the familiar highways close to home. There is probably a delightful jocularity among the twelve. With prospects of going home and their long journey away from the Sea of Galilee nearing conclusion, one can imagine a restive light-heartedness. Possibly, among some, there is a weariness from the tiring ~~trip~~<sup>trip</sup> and an impatience with entering the gates of their own hometown. One can well imagine some sporty jesting, as well as some testiness from the tired members of Jesus' entourage. Yet, Jesus is not as blithe as his disciples might have been, nor as weary. Something seems to be gnawing within his soul, something tremendously important. It is the vision for which he came into the world. It is the fulfillment of the divine plan that he must accomplish.

"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands," says the pensive Lord, "and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again" (v. 31). In a few words, out in the middle of nowhere, Jesus once more revealed the greatest secret of the universe. It is the hidden secret of heaven itself. It is the gospel sewn up in a few chosen words. It seemed lost on the twelve. They were probably too caught up in the prospects of dining at their own table and sleeping in their own beds to comprehend the seemingly dark words of their master about betrayal and death. They even missed the words focused on the Resurrection.

When they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus' demeanor changes again. No longer caught in introspection, he is wondering about the conversations along the way. He is curious about what he missed. The twelve, never overly calm and frequently arguing about this and that, were embroiled in a conversation that probably began with jokes and quips and wound up with insults and boasts. As Jesus walks over to some of them in the house in which they were staying, he asks about their noisy conversation. Their boastfulness fell to silence. They became as quiet as fish in a giant sea. One has the distinct impression from Mark's words that they were embarrassed, and not just embarrassed, but deeply

mortified. "Why did Jesus have to ask that?" a disciple might have wondered.

"Well, it was nothing really," one might haltingly admit.

"No, nothing," a more caustic disciple could add, "because they were arguing over who is the greatest, and *none of them* won." A final sting added to the stabs already thrust at one another just might awkwardly float to the surface.

Eventually, someone spills the whole sordid truth.

It is enough for Jesus to seize the opportunity to share still another secret. If the first hidden secret was about the evangel, the gospel, the bad news of his impending death and the good news of his imminent resurrection, the second secret concerned the evangelists themselves, those who are to live and share the good news afterward. Divine truth is revealed on the homeward journey as they trudge the final miles, but its human application is divulged around the family circle in the intimacy of a familiar home.

In the midst of their interplay, it is evident that Jesus expects heavenly truth to be humanly lived. That is the challenge of the Christian home. It is not merely to tell Bible stories at bedtime and sing Bible camp songs on awakening, but to take the most sublime ideas ever to brighten this world and employ them eagerly to life.

Here are the two elements of an essential family discussion. On the one hand, we have the lofty theme of love and sacrifice that ultimately turns into victory. On the other hand, we have the mundane matter of human conceit, arrogance, and indifference to others . . . not to mention out-and-out disregard. How can we take the towering themes of the gospel and apply them to day-to-day struggles?

How would Jesus handle them?

Let us go back to the first secret he unveiled as they wandered along the rocky roadway to Capernaum. Out of the blue, Jesus makes a startling observation. Or is it so startling? It seems to me it is a calculated effort on the part of the Redeemer to deal lovingly and thoughtfully with a family matter, and just to shock his compatriots. Mark is careful to point out that Jesus did not want anyone to know he was passing through that region. He wants to concentrate on his disciples and their need to know the divine plan. The author makes it clear that Jesus is teaching the twelve. He also makes a distinction between the words Jesus uses in

revealing this hidden secret now and the time before . . . just days before when he and the inner circle climbed the Mount of Transfiguration (8:32-38).

Jesus said something very different, very revealing: "The Son of Man is *to be betrayed into human hands*" (v. 31). He had not shared with them previously that his death begins with *betrayal* and also *into human hands*.

This is a unique family, and yet it is Jesus' extended family. He is aware that dark thoughts have crept into the deep recesses of the soul of one of those he loves. He knows Judas is stewing with thoughts of betrayal, perhaps eager to push the Great Rabbi into a role he does not want: the role of an earthly king or revolutionary commander or Roman antagonist—a role Jesus does not seek at all. Still, it may have been Judas' desire to push Jesus in that direction for he was a political zealot bent on the restoration of independence and the ridding of Israel's Roman scourge.

Jesus had shared the secret before, but never with this specific awareness: human hands would be involved! It is almost as if Jesus is reaching out, straining to restrain a maniacal friend from becoming his own worst enemy. Jesus shares the gospel in that conversation, but he does more. He lives it in all its implications. There is grace offered, and the opportunity for forgiveness extended. There is love and the encouragement to abandon the despicable plan put forward in a gentle, oblique way.

Back at the house, once they are settled in and the evening meal is concluded, we imagine the time for relaxing engulfs the whole household. The women clean the dishes and put the food away. There is the smell of cooked fish and red wine and olive oil lamps hanging in the room. The sounds of light conversations between the twelve and their hostesses, among themselves or with Jesus punctuate the lively scene. This is probably Peter's house. His wife and mother-in-law probably did the cooking. His children are probably spilling underfoot, happy to see their father, and joyous over Jesus and his attentiveness. As he inquires about the argument along the way, he settles down on the floor, cross-legged. The twelve stand about, some leaning against the walls. The women eavesdrop. The children continue to roll around on the floor and play with their primitive toys until Jesus lifts up one of the children and places it in the middle of the circle.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (v. 35), he says. Here is a lively visual aid, an ideal argument against their non-productive discussion of who is the greatest. The humble little one; always dependent, always vulnerable is his example.

Then he lifts the little one into the crook of his carpenter strong arm and explains, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (v. 37).

The evangelists could not begin to preach the *evangel*, the good news, until they master this important concept—nor can we, really. It is fundamental. Love must be lived, not just preached. Love must be extended to the lowliest, the smallest, the least of all before it becomes a love that can reach into other dimensions. Yet even here, Jesus is focused on Judas. If the other eleven need to learn this lesson, the man of Iscariot needs to learn it more. If James and John fight over who sits at the Lord’s left and right hand, while Judas is bent on demanding a lesser throne in a decadent kingdom instead of a place in heaven’s realm, Jesus must teach them all. Jesus is reaching out to the very least of the twelve, as he wants us to attend to the needs of those within our families and neighborhoods that others overlook. Jesus, ever the consummate teacher, is also an image of his Father and deals with the squabbles of his children as a patient, but righteous, parent should.

Hidden secrets are exposed. They are the gems of faith. One is the gospel. The other is how it is lived out in the world of human beings patiently, lovingly taught.

In the fall of 1991, as the former Soviet Union invited Christians to bring a renewed faith to their depleted spirituality, nineteen evangelicals went to Moscow at the invitation of President Gorbachev and the Supreme Soviet. Philip Yancey tells the story in his remarkable article in the pages of *Christianity Today*. They were staying in a posh hotel and were royally received by Soviet authorities, scholars, the press, and other leaders. One day, however, a surprise guest show up. His name was Basil, a huge hulk of a man with a voice that had the blast of a launched rocket. He was an ex-convict. He sought five minutes to address the American Christians. Then he blasted away like ignited kegs of dynamite.

The KGB had arrested him for publishing Christian tracts and distributing them in his homeland of Moldavia in 1962. He spent ten years in prison for that crime. Disillusioned, he wondered why God abandoned him. Then he came to the conclusion he was not abandoned. God had a ministry for him right there. As the prisoners at the labor camp assembled in an open space for roll call at sunup, he discovered the camp guards were not as punctual as the prisoners. He used those minutes to preach. That is why his voice had grown to freight train decibels. He had no microphone. It took him two weeks to deliver a single sermon, since he only had two minutes a day to preach. There were all kinds of prisoners. Some were actual convicts. Others were imprisoned, as Basil was, for Christian preaching, or criticizing the government. But his captive audience proved to be a receptive crowd to hear the gospel. Among them, as a convicted felon, he sought to live out its message under the scrutiny of guards and prisoners alike.

Basil had heard that the American Christians were in Moscow. He once listened to the clandestine radio broadcasts of several of the evangelicals in the group. Picking apples and grapes from Moldavia, he rode a train fourteen hours to give them a welcome with fruit from his homeland and a prayerful wish. "Be bold!" he asserted. "Where I come from the believers are praying for you at this minute. We believe your visit will help reach our country for God."

Basil could not leave the secrets of the gospel hidden from his fellow prisoners, nor could he fail to live it out in the *gulag*. He found his family to embrace everyone inside the barbed wire confines of that prison camp. Our family is just as broad and wide and deep, if not much more free. In imitation of Jesus, we are to share divine truth by applying it to the humanity around us. That is the way to ensure these hidden secrets will be hidden no longer.

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