

Denial
September 24, 2006
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The Gospel for this Sunday begins with Jesus saying *The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise* (Mark 9:31). This is the second of three Passion predictions Jesus makes to the disciples. Since they didn't ask any questions we can assume they didn't understand what he told them, or they were afraid to ask what he meant. *Denial* has elements of both.

The disciples *are* in denial, and denial is the tool they, and we, use to avoid reality, or to make reality more bearable. Denial is not a river in Egypt, denial is make-believe. By pretending that circumstances are different from what they really are, we can function, for a while. As someone said, "denial is confusing because it resembles sleeping. We're not really aware we're doing it until we're done doing it." Denial is a survival tool. It can soothe for the short run, but then in time, it turns sick, making the abnormal seem

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normal. The unreal world comes to be seen as the real world. Nothing is wrong. The problem doesn't exist.

We probably shouldn't be too hard on these denial-prone disciples, nor on ourselves, their denial-prone descendents. To grasp the last morbid ounce of *Christ crucified* would have sent them into cultural shock. I think Jesus, as the physician of their souls, knew this, so he tried, as gently as possible, to forewarn them of what was to come. It was as if Jesus knew that those who followed him and risked their lives on his account had to be brought gradually into such a painful, unprecedented reality. Otherwise, the truth would engulf them.

So, they deny. They dodge living into the reality of what *Christ crucified* means, for them and for Jesus, and escape into one of our culture's most common forms of diversion, contesting who is the greatest among them. *Who* is number one? *Who* will take

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positions of preeminence is a Messianic kingdom whose king will be executed as a criminal? The ludicrousness of it all is lost in a haze of denial. Clamoring as to who is number one on the way to the gallows in Jerusalem is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. They displace reality with fantasy. Their denial will not allow them to see what is going on.

Jesus, no surprise, is not impressed. That they had been talking about who was the greatest among them immediately after what Jesus had told them calls for a **time out**. When a Rabbi in Jesus' day really wanted to bring something home to his students, he sat down to teach. Mark makes a point of saying that Jesus sat down (v. 35a). Given what Jesus was about to tell them, the disciples should have sat down themselves.

If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all, Jesus said (v. 35b). And then he gives

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them an object lesson in what he is talking about. He took a small child in his arms and told them, *whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives, not me, but him who sent me* (v. 37).

The disciples must have been drop-jawed when Jesus picked up the child. Why a child and a little one at that? Children are precious and child-like. The opposite of all worldly greatness and influence is a child. Children cannot vote, they cannot pay taxes; they command no status so they have no political power. They are as dependent emotionally on significant others as they are physically reliant on them. They want simply to be accepted and loved. Above all, children are open, trusting and forgiving. The innocent ones.

What Jesus seems to be telling the disciples, *and us*, is that if you truly open yourselves to kingdom grace

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with the fresh-faced fervency of a child, then something miraculous will take place within you. You will become a lot less concerned about achieving and protecting your position in the world. Building your life around career enhancement and living other people's lives will lose its appeal. You'll care less about getting ahead of others and spend more time trying to understand their world and how to reach them without thinking much about personal payoff. In other words, you will want to serve those whom God gives you, not for credit, not to get to heaven, not to earn a position or build up a reputation or gain a badge of honor, but because this new desire to love and serve the undeserving *has taken root* in you.

If the disciples are competing with each other, as we heard in the Gospel, then the people to whom their discipleship is extended are nothing more than a means to an end. They are *its* to be used, not *thous* to

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be served and so the disciples become not *servers*, but *exploiters*.

True faith that issues in works is not possible without genuine compassion and compassion and competition cannot coexist. When acting out of a competitive mode, the disciples will want to get something out of the relationship, something to show off as a prize in the competition. But a child...a child has nothing to repay with. A child is as empty handed as open handed. A child is willing to accept without thought of a payback. So it is with the poor, for whom the child is but one example. Maybe this is what Jesus was trying to tell us about accepting him.

So, the motivation for all ministries is not to add lines to one's service record to move up in the ranks. The motivation comes out of thankful self-expenditure for the love of Christ. With Jesus there is no question of rank and status in discipleship at all. There is no

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thought of repayment of any sort. To serve Christ in our sisters and brothers is its own payment, for it is, after all, Christ himself whom we serve.

AMEN.