

“The Gospel of Discomfort”

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Mark 9.30-37

James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a

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When I was in Indiana last month with my cohort of pastors, we had some free time and decided to break into groups and play games. Four of us decided to play Euchre. My team consisted of myself and another Michigander, and the other team included two Hoosiers. This game started out friendly. As the game went on, though, the competitiveness came out. We argued over which state could take credit for the game, which state was better at playing, which rules were the best, and of course, which team was going to win. This was big talk for someone who grew up in Ohio and didn't learn how to play until adulthood. As the game intensified, so did our bad game behavior. We were not going to lose! For the record, the Michiganders won both games.

Playing card games and board games can be fun, but they can also be incredibly intense. The game can go downhill when someone is absolutely sure of their skills, especially if they rub it in. We live in a society that is obsessed with winning, whether it is a card game or an argument. We are taught in society to be right, to be accurate, because we want to keep our job status, our place in line, our place in the world. If we lose, we're vulnerable, which is a difficult place to be in a competitive world. Our system is not built for vulnerability. Yet, humans are built for vulnerability – it is how we connect.

Both scripture passages today deal with conflict. They deal with humanity and how we often relate to one another. We continue in the Gospel of Mark this week. Jesus is portrayed in this gospel as moving quickly from one place to another. He travels quickly, changing the norm as he goes, bringing to light injustices. He now has taken the disciples to a more secret place because he is trying to explain to them that he will die. He does this perhaps so they aren't distracted or disrupted. He might also have been trying to keep it quiet because he doesn't want those in authority to know what he is talking about.

In every Gospel, when Jesus explains his death and resurrection, the disciples are always confused. This is a typical response because the resurrection is a confusing topic. We know Jesus was resurrected, and we still cannot fully explain how it happened or whether it was a bodily resurrection or spirit. There is so much unknown on the other side of resurrection, I imagine it was even more mysterious for the disciples. Also, they truly loved Jesus and were following him – his words and his actions. For a loved one to say that they will die can be difficult to process, and so for many of the disciples they deny that this will happen.

The reading even tells us that they are confused. And, they are confused but afraid to ask. How many times have you felt scared to ask something, and regretted not doing so later? Maybe we're intimidated by the person or afraid of the answer, or perhaps there is something else

complicated going on. When we ask questions, it can make us vulnerable. It portrays that we don't know everything, or that we're new, or that we don't have the world figured out. Logically, we all know this – we know no one else has this all figured out – but sometimes I think we forget that.

The disciples don't ask any clarification questions, and so Jesus keeps going, and they don't understand even past the resurrection. They miss out on an opportunity here to connect with Jesus. They miss out on an opportunity to grow. They miss out on so much – and when we don't engage and ask questions and become vulnerable, we miss out, too.

I love reading Brene Brown's work, and her research is deeply invested in vulnerability and how it connects humanity. She talks about how it has deepened her own work and that when we can let go of the pretenses, we connect on another level. The pandemic made us all vulnerable. Not only were we all vulnerable to the virus, our entire lives were put on display. Our messy homes, our chaotic family life, our noisy dogs all became Zoom background and we were showing our more vulnerable sides. We showed that we are all human and we all were in this together, and I believe that connected us even more.

Sometimes when we are covering up our vulnerabilities, when we are trying too hard to disguise and mask, disagreements arise. When we try too hard to protect that which we cannot control, we become defensive. Jesus hears the disciples arguing and calls them out on it. He asks them what is going on and we find out they are arguing over who will be first! Like kids racing to the ice cream line, or maybe even adults to the ice cream line – they are competing. Jesus gives this sentence that the first will be last and the last will be first – another way that he challenges the already existing system, turning power on its head. He offers a new perspective.

Even after explaining it, they aren't understanding, so he continues by giving the example of children. He tells them that they must welcome the children, because when they do that, they are welcoming God. When they welcome the children, they are welcoming those without power or status. When they welcome children, they are saying that the rulers and others will not have the last say. Jesus was doing this all the time – whenever he welcomed the tax collectors, when he met the woman at the well, when he welcomed children – all people that society would have ignored at that time. Who are those people today that are considered on the fringe of society? Who are those that are not welcomed into community?

The James passage talks about a harvest of righteousness. I love this because in the presbytery meeting on Tuesday our preacher, Rev. Dr. Alonzo Johnson talked about a "harvest party." At the harvest party he said we "never come without – always be ready to share." This passage is all about sharing and generosity. When we share and give generously we are often being vulnerable. We are giving without the expectation of receiving. This is about giving time or money or resources – whatever gifts we bring to the table. The harvest party cannot happen if we are too focused on ourselves, if we aren't hearing other voices or listening to other people. This goes back to the conflict again. If we aren't listening then we cannot support one another.

It seems that conflict is pretty typical in society anymore. There has always been division in the world but perhaps we feel it more acutely now. We are figuring out how to have

conversations again. Too long people have decided to agree to disagree. I don't think this has benefited anyone. There are some things we can agree to disagree on. I will agree to disagree on ice cream flavors. We can agree to disagree on carpet colors. We can agree to disagree on the best kind of music or television show.

We cannot agree to disagree on the treatment of human beings in our world. We cannot agree to disagree with exclusion and refusing generosity. We cannot agree to disagree on refusing someone human dignity. When envy, selfishness, or fear come into play, we have lost that vulnerability. We have lost that ability to talk and see that the last will be first and the first will be last.

Being vulnerable in this world is difficult and uncomfortable. Being last is hard. Being willing to listen can be a struggle. I trust that God is equipping us for a transformation within the world so that we can authentically connect with one another and do God's good work in that hurting world. Thanks be to God. Amen.