

## The Silence of the Disciples

Rev. Dr. Benton J. Trawick

Grace Presbyterian Church

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Mark 9: 30-37

The internet is a wonderful thing, a world of information at the click of a mouse. If you want to know the capital of Morocco because you can't remember it from your world geography class years ago, you just Google it, and "Bingo!" you get the answer, Rabat, as well as a picture of the flag, a map of the Moroccan coastline, and an estimate that it is a 7 hour and ten-minute flight from here because the internet knows where you are.

Or, if you want a recipe for Chicken Kiev or Parmesan Crusted Artichoke Hearts, just type it in the search bar, the internet is your cookbook.

You can study art history, learn to repair a leaky faucet, or you can use the internet for what most people do most of the time, which is to watch amusing pet videos.

If you haven't seen it, you owe it to yourself to search for "Denver the Guilty Dog." The 2-minute video is one hundred percent family friendly, so parents, enjoy it with your kids. It begins as a classic whodunnit: the camera zooms in on a pilfered package of kitty cat treats, evidence of a crime that has been committed. The cameraman comments, "I guess we'd better look at the suspects."

The first suspect to come before the camera is Macie, an older dog who endures the questioning with mild discomfort, but also

a sort of dignified, resolute innocence that can only be born of truth. The owner says, “I don’t think you did it, Macie. So, now we’ll interview our next suspect: Denver.”

And the camera pans to the most pitiful portrait of canine contrition that the world has ever known: eyes squinted nearly shut, tail tucked, and a posture halfway between a slouch and a full-on slump. “What? Denver? Did you do this?” the owner inquires. And Denver looks even more guilty, if that’s possible, tucking his head, looking at the floor, looking anywhere but at the package or at his master.

“Denver, look at me,” his master commands...and we now look upon the undeniable grimace of guilt. Denver is one hundred percent busted. Now, before moving on, let’s understand a couple of things about the video—Denver knew it was wrong to take the treats from the very moment he took the package—even BEFORE he took the package, he knew it was wrong. It’s why he’s so guilty. He just wanted the treats more than he wanted to be a good dog.

And the owner? He knew the who, what, when, where and why of it all as soon as he walked in the door. Macie was never a suspect—it very much has the feeling of this not being the first time that this type of thing has occurred. Everyone in that room knew what was going on.

So, why am I talking about pet videos and about Denver, who totally knows what a good dog should be but hasn’t yet learned to be one, and about the grimace of guilt? Because

this might as well be a video from our scripture lesson for this morning. And I want to start in the middle of our scripture lesson—the part where Jesus and his disciples have arrived at Capernaum. When Jesus was in the house, Mark tells us, he asked them, “So, what were you arguing about on the way?”

Except I don't think that he asks the question with the tone of idle curiosity I just used—I think it was more like, (Reprovingly) “Peter.....James....John....what were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent.....for on the way, they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

**BUSTED.** The disciples totally know that their mission shouldn't be to achieve greatness, they **KNOW** that the kingdom demands their obedience, their humility, their dogged devotion to discipleship...but they want...power? Prestige? Privilege? Greatness? More than they want to be good disciples. Somebody needs a few more sessions of obedience school. Right now, all they can do is look at the floor.

You see, just like with Denver the downcast dog, this is not the first time that this scene has taken place. Jesus has been teaching his disciples that his path—and therefore theirs—must be one of suffering, of sacrifice, of costly obedience. That is the way of the kingdom of heaven: the last shall be first, the first shall be last.

Recall that in last week's lectionary passage, Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the messiah—but then, when Jesus began to teach that the messiah must suffer rejection, persecution, opposition, Peter rebuked him.

In response, Jesus called Peter down...and said to all of his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me.”

Our scripture lesson for today begins with the same song, different verse: “He was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they didn’t understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask him.

Given that the lesson is a direct repeat of last week’s teaching, that verse should likely read, “They STILL didn’t understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask him AGAIN.” Jesus is talking nonsense in the eyes of the world, nonsense in the eyes of his own disciples, because how do you OVERCOME the power of the Roman Empire without out- Caesar-ing Caesar?

Paul is absolutely right when he says in First Corinthians, “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

So, the disciples know what they SHOULD believe, or do—they know they SHOULD be obedient, sacrificial...but they just can’t let go of their vision of a messiah who will restore power to Israel, glory to the Davidic monarchy, and will bring glory to the ones who are his followers. Hence the argument—“Who is the greatest?”--and yet the guilty silence when

Jesus asks what they are talking about. They've heard what Jesus has been teaching—but they haven't internalized it, they haven't owned it, they aren't ready to follow the path of obedience.

Jesus sat down, Mark says—it is an important act, because rabbis sat down to teach or to instruct. He sat down, called the twelve to him and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Then he took a little child and put it among them and said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me...but the one who sent me.

In plain words— “Whoever embraces the powerless, the voiceless, the vulnerable— understands the very heart of God.” Now the disciples have heard this message—not once, not twice, but again and again. And yet. And yet they have not internalized it in such a way that it impacts their decisions or behavior.

Denver knows the right answer...but he's not ready to commit to the right action. He wants what he wants.

Now the challenge for us, I suggest, is this. I don't think Jesus' teaching—his path—his call to cross-bearing sacrificial discipleship comes any more readily now than it did two thousand years ago. The message of the cross, in other words, is STILL foolishness to the worldly wise, and the path of discipleship still leads where we hesitate to go. I think the

propensity is just as real for us as for Jesus' disciples to HEAR the message, to KNOW what Jesus is calling us to, but to strive for what the world values.

Even in the church. We KNOW, for example, that success, in terms of mission, ministry, discipleship, consists in how faithfully we embrace the meek, the weak, the outcast and the lonely.... but we consistently fall into measuring our success in terms of budgets, attendance, the outward trappings of success or achievement. We confuse enlarging our influence with enlarging our ministry.

We KNOW that our call is to embody forgiveness, RADICAL forgiveness, and to teach grace; but judgment feels like power, and righteous anger feels so right and so we often strive for vindication instead of reconciliation.

We can hear the kingdom call to love neighbor and to welcome the alien in our midst which is the message of a world without walls—but we build walls and we put our trust in security barriers, and instead of walking humbly and carrying a cross, we are more inclined to walk softly but carry a big stick.

The message of the gospel is counter-intuitive, countercultural, and not at all obvious or easy to follow.

We hear but we don't HEAR in other words, we get it but we don't always GET IT—We know what a good dog is, we just don't want to do what a good dog DOES.

What must we do then? Well, we must learn and learn and learn some more, and strive for love and not for success, and recognize even then that we won't always get it right.

We must call one another to account, ask forgiveness when we err, and understand that discipleship is a journey that is undertaken, not a status that is conferred.

And like Denver—perhaps we need to learn that what we want, what we keep striving after isn't what's good for us—and that is why the master who loves us is genuinely trying to teach us a more excellent way. We can strive after discipleship, even as the world seems to be going to the dogs. Amen