

“A Clear Goal” – the second of three messages on “Insider Info”

Mark 9:30-37

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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My message today starts with a “pop” quiz with two questions. I’m inviting you to share your answer on the first one but not the second. For the first, I’d like you to share your answer by raising your hand. Here it is: *“If you could have one of two superpowers, which would you choose: the power of invisibility or the power of flight?”* As you consider your answer, let me clarify. Whatever power you choose, you must choose one over the other and you are the only person in the world to have this power. Invisibility means the power to become transparent at will, including your clothing, but anything you pick up is visible. Flight means the power to fly at any altitude within the earth’s atmosphere at speeds up to 1,000 mph. You don’t get invulnerability or super strength with either one.

Are you ready to play? If so, raise your hand if you choose invisibility. Now, flight.

Now, the second question: *“How will you use this superpower?”* How will you handle the most powerful responsibility in the universe? What popped into your mind?

Some time ago John Hodgman asked these same questions in an informal, anecdotal survey and reported the results in the National Public Radio program *This American Life*. It was the answer to the second question that surprised him. No matter which power people chose, the majority used it in self-serving ways. Their goals weren’t often flashy or heroic. In fact, they were almost never heroic, nor even kind.

So, how’d you do?

Last week's message "A Clear Purpose" observed that Christians have a clear purpose (Mark 8:34): deny oneself, take up the cross, and be disciples. Today's theme, "A Clear Goal" pushes us toward implementation. What is our spiritual goal that moves us toward our purpose of being disciples? How does that square with the goal Jesus has in mind for us? How do we know when we've gotten there?

Let us first agree that goals are powerful. Visionary leadership for church, community and nation excites us to live our ideals by being clear about what we want to accomplish. 150 years ago this week, President Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Following the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, Lincoln declared that all slaves in states and territories still in rebellion against the United States of America would be declared free. The declaration of this goal gave renewed resolve to a Union wearied by a war—at that time 15 months old—that some had thought would be over in 90 days. Now, not only was the goal to restore the Union, but to live up to our highest ideal: *"that ALL men are created equal."*

Similarly, personal goals can be powerful motivators. Let me speak pointedly (although not exclusively) to our youth and young adults. The quality of life is closely linked to setting goals. You have heard this from parents, teachers, coaches and mentors. To the typical question of "What do you want to be or do when you grow up?", I challenge you to ask "How can I become a persons of value?" You are already infinitely valuable in God's sight. How will you tap that potential? What brings you real joy, not just popularity or temporary happiness? What dream have you secretly thought of that you don't dare tell anyone else because you think they'll laugh at you? Well, tell someone you trust! That person will not laugh at you. I hope we, at Mary Taylor Church, won't either. Don't limit your dreams! All dreams won't come true, but you'll never know if you stop dreaming.

Of course, us oldsters need to set goals, too. Last Thursday evening the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and I began the process of setting goals for my ministry by examining our opinions about what is the most important task of the pastor of this church at this particular time in its history. Of 12 choices, the two around which there were the greatest consensus were “Leading worship and preaching” and being “a leader among leaders.” Over the next 6 weeks I will propose specific, attainable and measurable steps to them that will be brought before Church Council for endorsement. Effectiveness in ministry is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit; AND it is enabled by clear goals and accountability.

This point is true in our non-professional life as well. The 12-Step programs that populate our building each week are based on goals. My own journey toward running marathons, a 26.2 mile race of which I have now run 6) involved goal-setting and accountability to a running partner. You have your own examples.

So back to discipleship: What is our spiritual goal that moves us toward being disciples? How does that square with the goal Jesus has in mind for us? How do we know when we’ve arrived?

The answer is found in today’s Gospel, Mark 9:30-37. If you wish, follow along on page 920. As I mentioned last week, we are traveling with Jesus as part of his inner circle. John Mark, the author of the Gospel, was a younger protégée of the disciple Peter. Scholars believe he reflects Peter’s perspective. Jesus clearly needs this time alone with his inner circle, for Mark tells us in verse 30 that Jesus did not want anyone to know that they were passing through Galilee. Jesus asks for quiet time with us to impart his deepest truths. If we are always immersed in the maddening crowds and frenetic activity, we will not hear these deepest truths.

In verse 31 Jesus tells his disciples, for the second time, that his ministry will result in his death and resurrection. Mark says in verse 32 “*they did not understand...and were afraid to ask him.*”

My hunch is that they understood all too well, like us when we have some medical problem. The doctor tells us what we don't want to hear. We are stunned. We don't ask follow-up questions. We go away shaking our heads.

Evidence that they were still caught in worldly thinking is revealed in verses 33 and 34. They have passed through Galilee, the northern part of Israel, and arrived at Capernaum, the center of Jesus' ministry for 20 months, over half of his ministry. "*What were you arguing about on the way?*" he asks his disciples. Do we think Jesus does not hear us? Do we think Jesus does not see us? Do we think Jesus does not know our hearts, and those secret thoughts we harbor as we consider what we would do if we had the power to fly or the power to become invisible? We can be as dense and obtuse as the disciples!

And they knew that he knew, for they were silent at his question, just as we are when we do the wrong thing when we know better. An embarrassed silence. An ashamed silence. A convicted silence. For they were arguing about who was the greatest. Here Jesus is, talking about the sacrifice to which his ministry will lead, and they are concerned with prestige and power.

I can't speak for you, but when I experience what Jesus experienced—being ignored, totally disrespected, people missing my point entirely—my tendency is to either rant and rave or withdraw. But look what Jesus does! In verse 35 he meets them where they are. "Fine," he says in effect, "you want to know who the greatest is? Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all."

There it is! A clear spiritual goal. Being disciples as we saw last week—self denying, cross-bearing, Jesus-following disciples—is our purpose. Being servant-disciples, servant-leaders, servant-Christians is our goal.

To be sure the disciples didn't miss the point, verse 36 tell us that Jesus took a child, held that child and said in verse 37:
“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Make no mistake: Jesus does not entertain sentimentality about children's cuteness, innocence or enthusiasm; no matter how cute, innocent and enthusiastic they may be. The point Jesus made, in light of the disciples discussion on greatness, is that children have little clout. Then. And now. They don't vote. They don't strike. They don't bail out of companies with golden parachutes leaving stockholders holding the price tag. They are, and represent, the powerless among us. When we welcome the powerless, we welcome Jesus. When we welcome Jesus, we welcome God.

This is not for the feint of heart. Ask the Sunday School teachers we dedicated this morning. Servant-ministry is not easy. I fall down all the time trying to do it. My heart is closer, more often than I care to admit, to the disciples arguing about who is the greatest. But servant-ministry is our call and our goal.

What else do we mean when we pray, *“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* When I review the Lord's Prayer with Confirmation classes I ask them what they suppose the will of the Lord is. Invariably they speak of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, understanding and love. Servant-ministry, caring for the needs of others, is the goal of Christ's disciples that lives this prayer. And by the way, this caring is for leaders as well as newcomers, seasoned veterans of service in the church as well as the newest disciples among us.

And giving such care and compassion is not just the responsibility of seasoned leadership. Sometime we—I!—fail to invite newer disciples to deeper levels of service. We handle newcomers with kid-gloves. But why? If we truly believe that the Lord of Life is with us in this ministry, let us boldly invite people

to step-up to it. Yes, of course, we have to get to know and not overwhelm new folks. But we should also not wait to ask newcomer as well as veteran, *“How is Christ inviting you to serve?”*

So there it is. As people whose purpose is to be disciples of Christ, our goal is to be in servant-ministry. Servant-ministry promotes others before ourselves and asks “What is Jesus calling me to?” not “What is it I want to do?” Servant-ministry aligns our souls and our programs with the Spirit of Jesus who taught us to pray “Thy will be done.” Consider this as you reflect this week in your own discipleship. And come next week with your own thoughts about what that might look like in “A Clear Plan.” You know I will!

And welcome! Welcome to a journey that, though challenging, is the most fulfilling thing we can do in this life. Amen.