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Mark 9:30-37
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To See and Be Seen

A woman was driving down the Interstate. The car in front of her had a bumper sticker that read, "Start seeing motorcycles." "I didn't know I wasn't seeing motorcycles," she thought to herself, then realized, that was the point. How do you begin to see something you didn't know you were missing?

We have come to a crossroads in the ninth chapter of Mark's gospel. God's kingdom is on the march and Jesus and the disciples have gone back to Galilee, a biblical code word for base-camp, headquarters, the place where it all began. Galilee means "home," where significant family meetings are held and long-range plans are hammered out. When Jesus and his disciples go to Galilee to talk, serious business is at hand.

Jesus gathers his disciples around a table. He wants to teach them about the Kingdom of God, about how to recognize it, and how to receive it. His teaching is revolutionary, even for that day and time. "You want to be great?" Jesus asks his quibbling disciples. Heads nod around the table. "Okay," he says, "Let me show you the meaning of greatness," and then Jesus takes a small child and puts it in their midst and says, "Here! Look! This is greatness. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all and whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me."

Mouths drop open. Chairs clatter to the floor. Stunned silence. In the history of pedagogy there has never been a more shocking, grab-you-by-the-throat-and-turn-the-world-inside-out, teaching technique. A child as a metaphor for greatness, as the medium through which Christ is revealed? In an instant everything the disciples thought they knew about Jesus and the meaning of faithfulness is flipped upside down. A Duke Geology professor may as well have told her students the world is indeed flat and your finance prof may as well have said the key to lasting wealth is to give all your money to the poor. The weatherman calling for snow in September or coach K announcing his transfer to Chapel Hill would be more believable.

In our culture, we love children. We indulge their dreams in all possible ways. Our social conventions have exalted childhood as a privileged time of innocence. We see children as our most prized possessions, the vehicles for our own hopes and aspirations. Thus, the shock value of this story is hard for us to appreciate. The child in antiquity was a nobody, a non-person. Children would never have been hanging around the teacher and his male students. To insist that receiving a child might have some value for adults, particularly males, is almost inconceivable.

It wasn't just that children were to be seen and not heard. They were not even to be seen. They were to be non-existent, utterly invisible. And Jesus places the child in the midst of the table and says, "Look at this child. Whoever welcomes one of these invisible ones welcomes me."

Furthermore, the child is not merely a child, but a metaphor in the hands of the master teacher, a metaphor for every person we miss in our outrageous ambition to be

first, every person who finds him or herself in last place in life, every person who is invisible.

Throughout Mark's gospel Jesus makes a habit of making people who were otherwise invisible, visible, especially children. In chapter 5, to the amazement of the crowds, he brings back a nameless little girl from the dead. He casts out a demon from the Syrophenecian woman's daughter in Chapter 7. Earlier in chapter 9 he heals a little boy of an unclean spirit. Jesus himself has an invisible childhood. The gospels tell us virtually nothing about it. And now Jesus says, "Anyone who welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me." If you want to encounter Jesus, you will find him in the disguise of someone who is otherwise invisible.

In South Africa there is a concept called *Ubuntu*. It means "I see you." When we greet one another in this culture, we say, "How are you?" And nine times out of ten the answer is "fine," which, at least three times out of ten is a complete fabrication. But in South Africa, they greet one another with these words, "I see you." "I see you, too." In other words, I recognize you as a human being. I see that you matter. I see that you are not invisible. I see that you, too, are created in the image of God.

A couple of years ago a freshman was in my office two weeks after school started. "I feel invisible here," he said. "If I disappeared, I'm not sure anyone would even notice." Duke can be a tough place to fit in and an easy place to feel invisible when it seems everyone is competing to be the most visible. First years feel invisible in the presence of upper-class students. Junior faculty feel invisible at the feet of senior faculty. Food service workers, grounds-keepers, maintenance personal, all might feel invisible much of the time.

Life beyond the walls of Duke is not so different. There are invisible people all around us. The elderly in nursing homes; the migrant workers who pick crops in the blazing sun; the 2.2 million members of the US population locked up behind bars; the 13 million children who live in poverty in the United States; the statistics that scroll across our TV screen each night during the evening news. Shadows, numbers, people, all invisible, all Jesus in disguise.

Many of you have commented on the Chapel's ministry in the West End of Durham in sincere, warm, and well-meaning ways. "Oh, it's so good to be making a difference in Durham." "It's good that the Chapel is trying to fix some of the problems that Durham faces." "It's great that the Chapel is trying to help alleviate poverty and crime and strengthen neighborhoods." But the truth is the Chapel is not trying to do any of these things. For 75 years the West End of Durham, located only a mile from the Chapel steps, has been invisible to Duke Chapel. We are simply trying to make the Chapel and the West End more visible to one another. Jesus says when you welcome someone who is invisible, you welcome me. We are in ministry in the West End because so many people who live there are otherwise invisible and we want to be transformed by an encounter with Jesus. We are in ministry in the West End because above all we want Jesus to be made visible.

When Jesus gathers with his disciples around the table he turns the world upside down. From the moment the disciples leave the table in Galilee, everything will be different. The first shall be last; the last shall be the greatest. The invisible will become visible. Christians celebrate Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, because it is in gathering around the table that we learn to see more clearly, that we learn to see and be

seen. Around the table, in the bread and wine, in the hymns that we sing, in the presence of one another, Jesus becomes visible.

We are starting to gear up for our fall and spring break student mission trips. If you have been on one of these trips before you know how life-transforming they are, how when you come back you never see the world the same way again. A couple of years ago I went to Honduras with a group of undergraduates over spring break. We were welcomed into a little community called *Ojo de Agua*, or Eye of Water, way up in the Southern Honduran mountains. We slept on cement floors, didn't have running water and electricity, and worked on building a little house for a father and his two children who had recently lost their wife and mother. More than that we formed friendships with people who seemed completely different from us and received hospitality that would put most of us, even us Southerners, to shame. At the end of the week we gathered in the community to say our goodbyes. We sang together, laughed together, prayed together, and exchanged gifts with one another. And then, just before we were to retire for the night, a little boy climbed up on the table so he could get our attention. Oh, I'd seen him around, running here and there with a brick in his hand or a soccer ball at his feet, but I hadn't paid much attention to him. He was the youngest of the children who was to live in the new house, and through a translator, and eyes brimming with tears, he spoke eloquently about our time together, about how much it meant to him, about how thankful he was that we had become friends.

I was standing between two students. None of the three of us could hold back the tears. "Jesus," whispered the student to my left. "Jesus indeed," said the one to my right.

Amen.