

Tilted Halos

Mark 9:30-37

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Anthony de Mello once told this story: A man walked into the doctor's office and said, "Doctor, I have this awful headache that never leaves me. Could you give me something for it?"

"Of course," said the doctor, "but I want to check a few things out first. Tell me, do you drink a lot of liquor?"

"Liquor?" said the man indignantly. "I never touch the filthy stuff."

"How about smoking?"

"I think smoking is disgusting. I've never in my life touched tobacco."

"I'm a bit embarrassed to ask this, but — you know the way some men are — do you do any running around at night?"

"Of course not. What do you take me for? I'm in bed every night by ten o'clock at the latest."

"Tell me," said the doctor. "The pain in your head — the headache — is it a sharp, shooting kind of pain?"

"Yes," said the man. "That's it — a sharp, shooting kind of pain!"

"Simple, my dear fellow! Your trouble is you have your halo on too tight. All we need to do is loosen it a bit" (*Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations*, 114-115).

Brennan Manning has said, "The trouble with our ideals is that if we live up to all of them, we become impossible to live with."

I don't know about you, but I get the sense from our passage today that some of Jesus' disciples were starting to become a little difficult to live with...

To be fair, they had been on a bit of a winning streak as of late. Jesus' popularity among the locals was soaring — which, in turn, meant that *their* popularity was soaring. It was success by association.

And for all his missteps and mess-ups, Peter had finally aced one of Jesus' pop-quizzes:

Question #1: "Who do people say that I am?"

The disciples' answer: "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, still others say one of the prophets."

Question #2: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Peter's answer: "You are the Messiah." That's a pretty important pop quiz to ace if you're one of Jesus' disciples.

And few of the disciples had even been up to the mountain top and watched as the thin veil between heaven and earth was torn open and Jesus was transfigured in blinding light. Even Moses and Elijah showed up for that one.

So, yeah, things had been going pretty well for the disciples recently. They had been on quite the win streak... which is exactly what they had been talking about at the back of the class when they should have been listening to Jesus.

"What were you all arguing about on the way?" he asked them.

They sort of awkwardly side-eyed one another, but no one had the courage to speak — so they remained silent. What was it that the writer of Ecclesiastes once said? "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... [there is] a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (3:1, 7). In this moment, they kept silent, because as obtuse as they could be, even they understood that arguing about who was the greatest would not go over well with Jesus.

Do you know how workplaces have those signs that say: "It's been (blank many) days since we've experienced a work place accident?" Well, if the disciples had one, it would have said, "It's been (blank many) days since we've experienced a foot-in-mouth incident," and the tally would have just reset to zero.

They didn't have to say anything. Even if he wasn't Jesus, the Messiah, the son of the living God, who at times seemed to know what they were thinking before they did, he could read the room. They'd all been acting "holier-than-thou" for days.

I've told you the story before of the well-respected professor who went to visit the Japanese Zen Master named Nan-in, because he wanted to learn about Zen Buddhism. Nan-in received the professor and offered him tea. As he prepared the tea, the professor began regaling Nan-in with everything he already knew about Zen Buddhism — every book he'd read, every temple he'd visited, every master he'd met.

As the professor kept talking about everything he already knew about Zen Buddhism, Nan-in poured the professor's cup full... and then kept on pouring... and kept on pouring. The professor watched as the cup overflowed onto the saucer and then the table, until tea was spilling everywhere and he could no longer take it. "The cup is too full," he said. "No more will go in!"

Nan-in looked the professor in the eye and replied, "Like this cup, you are too full. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Jesus was running into something like that with his disciples. They were too full of themselves for Jesus to be able to pour anything else into them. They needed to empty themselves first.

So Jesus called the Twelve together around him and he said, “So you want *first* place? Then take *last* place. Be the servant of all” (9:35).

Then Jesus hopped up and he grabbed one of the children bouncing on one of the nearby couches and set the child right in the middle of them.

Now, we don’t know if the child was a boy or a girl, but we do know that children were of no consequence. They were thought to be self-willed, lacking in understanding, and in need of stern discipline. Rabbis, in particular, did not associate with children.

How extreme was this expectation? Simply talking with a child was held in the same regard by rabbis as drinking before noon or sleeping in until noon. These are the kinds of things that destroyed a person, because they were considered a complete waste of life – and chatting with children made that list.

In fact, in the ancient world abandoning infants was a normal practice. The Romans had a ritual in which a father would pick up his child immediately after it was born, thereby pledging to care for the child. But if the father refused to lift the child, it would be abandoned. So, in picking up this child, Jesus says that those who are abandoned should be welcomed into the church: “Whoever embraces one of these children embraces me.”

The child, utterly invisible to most, is a stand-in for Jesus. That means to welcome Jesus means to embrace those we might rather not see.

Brett Younger says it like this: “Christ is found in the one who’s left out.”

With Jesus, there is no stepping on others who we think are beneath us to make our way up the spiritual ladder. Rather, we are called to climb down off our high horse and lift them up. With Jesus, true greatness is measured by who we choose to embrace, and not who we leave out.

Do you know how miners let canaries loose in mines to see if the air is safe? Who do you think God has sent as canaries to visit our church to see if it’s safe? Who feels excluded here?

Father Gregory Boyle tells the story of the first wedding he ever officiated. He says:

“The first wedding I ever did was in Cochabamba, Bolivia. It was a humble Quechua couple, and the Mass was in the main Jesuit church in the center of town. Standing room only with Quechua Indians in their absolute finest clothes. Quechua *cholas* in brightly colored hoopy skirts and shawls, with tiny boulder hats perched at a tilt on top

of their pinched-back hair. Men in suits with white collars... Communion time arrives, and I go to the the couple.

They refuse to receive communion. I beg them. They will not budge. I go to the congregation and invite them to receive communion. Not one person comes forward. I beg and plead, but no one steps up.

I discover later, with the help of some [Catholic historians], that the Indians' sense of cultural disparagement and toxic shame was total. Since the time of the Conquista, when the Spaniards 'converted' the Indians, they baptized them, but [they were never fully welcomed into the church.] This was to be their place – outside of communion – forever.

Maybe we call this the opposite of God" (*Tattoos on the Heart*, 80-81).

Sometimes, when we try so desperately to keep our halos on too tight, we unintentionally become the very opposite of God. But Jesus is not ok with that. He isn't ok with us settling on a guest list of who is welcome in our church and who is not. Rather we are called to take those that the world has deemed invisible and to *see* them. We are called to welcome them, serve them, and make them at home here.

"When you welcome one such child in my name you welcome *me*," he said.

Do you ever wonder if the disciples got it? If it ever sunk in?

I do. I've been a baptized Christian since I was six years-old, and I think it gets harder and harder every year to keep my heart open to those who might otherwise get left out. I get more set in my ways every year. I don't feel more flexible. I feel less flexible – and I'm only turning 40 in a couple of weeks.

What about a church that is turning one-hundred and forty-nine?

Have we gotten so stuck in our ways that the world has moved on without us? Worse yet, have our hearts hardened to those who don't look like us, act like us, think like us, believe like us?

Don't get me wrong. I think we are a pretty welcoming place most of the time. I mean, last week we had a service dog named Samson in attendance, and I'm fairly certain someone snuck a cat in, because it insisted on saying the benediction with me.

But I wonder if we remember that church isn't supposed to exist for the healthy, but for the sick. And if being "perfect," if being "good," are prerequisites for membership, well then I suspect more than a few of us might need to have our memberships audited.

Did you know that Christen and I spent a summer in college as "Summer Missionaries?"

We were on a small island in Potomac River – Cobb Island, Maryland.

To this day, it was one of the hardest, most challenging summers of our lives and of our marriage. We spent our third anniversary in Cobb Island. It was towards the end of our summer there, and emotionally and spiritually exhausted, we took a day off to celebrate. It did not go well. We ended up mad at each other about some subject that I can now no longer recall, and the fight ended with Christen pelting me with day old Krispy Kreme doughnut holes. She has a pretty good arm, by the way.

But as difficult as many of those days were, there were also great blessings along the way. I received my first positive model of what it means to be a pastor to a church while we there. Larry Chambers was his name. When he was angry, he cussed like a sailor. But most of the time he had the most tender heart of any man I'd ever met.

The people around the small town referred to him as “The Submarine Captain of Cobb Island,” because one day while his wife and her friend were sunning on the bow of their speed boat, he accidentally sunk the boat.

I watched as he cared for a multi-millionaire widow and as he cared for the recovering alcoholic who was trying to regain custody of his son from the state. I watched as he cared for Bob, who introduced himself to Christen and I – the summer missionaries – like this: “Hi. I'm Bob. I'm a seven point Calvinist. I don't believe in missionaries.” (By the way, you can only be a five-point Calvinist.) There was no one he would not put his arm around and say, “Jesus loves you, and so do I.”

While we there, Larry and his wife, Janet, loaned us a 1988 Chrysler 5th Avenue to get us around town and off the island from time to time. When he gave us the keys, he said, “We wanted you to feel spoiled, so we gave you the nice car.” As I took the keys, I thought to myself, “This is the nice one?! I hate to see the not so nice one.”

It turns out it was the nice one, because it was the one that actually had air conditioning. On an island that boasted 90 degree temps most of the summer and never below 98 percent humidity, air conditioning was a godsend.

So for a summer Christen and I borrowed the “nice” car. On one of the first days we were cruising around in it, the A/C blasting, I made a hard left turn at one of the intersections and suddenly a cascade of freezing cold water came out of the floor vent on the passenger side and soaked Christen's feet, making her shriek in surprise.

It turns out that Larry forgot to tell us that the drain for the A/C condensation was plugged, and so from time to time a river of frigid water would dump on the floor board. *This* was the “nice” car.

But when in Rome... So, Christen and I decided to nickname our new ride. We started calling it “The Servant-mobile,” because it gave you a ride and washed your feet, too.

I think when we are at our best, we are like the Servant-mobile — because, like it, we aren't perfect, no matter how tightly we wear our halo. Rather, we're some mix of "on our way" and "all turned around." What is it the psalmist says? "There is none who is righteous; no, not one" (14:3). But not being perfect doesn't negate our call to be *servants*.

"Whoever wants to be first must become last of all and *servant* of all."

The call from Jesus in this passage is not to be perfect, but to realize that you aren't — and then to serve not from your righteousness, but your brokenness; not from your perfection, but from your imperfection. Because what we all share across every spectrum — our age, gender, race, orientation, socio-economic status, educational level, political affiliation — is that we *all* stand in need of God's grace.

Our brokenness isn't what separates us. It's what unites us.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

May we be the kind of church for the next 149 years that is known not for how tightly we wear our halos, but for how fully we welcome the otherwise forgotten into the fold of God.

Amen.