

Let's begin with full disclosure.

Sunday School will not help your children get ahead.

They will not learn here how to thrive in the marketplace or acquire necessary skill sets for securing a job in a tough economy.

Their time with Bible stories and catchy songs and popsicle sticks will not prepare them adequately for what we so uncritically call the real world.

Jesus claims to love your children, but he isn't at all focused on their future success.

Sunday School will not help them get ahead.

Indeed, Christian education is really about learning to get behind.

*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters,* among other reasons, because it's hard work at which even Jesus struggled.

Gospel author Mark very deliberately writes in this week's pivotal gospel reading that Jesus *began* to teach his disciples.

Mark has tipped this off just one story before today's reading with the story of Jesus healing a blind man...very gradually.

He spits and rubs saliva in his eyes, and the man says that he does see people, but they look like trees, walking.

It will take Jesus more effort than a wave of a magically messianic hand to get the blind man, and to get his disciples, to see.

It will now take Jesus more than two long chapters in Mark's gospel of spit and intention to lift the blindness of his students and teach them the secret of discipleship, to educate them in the art of getting behind.

He will predict his suffering and death and resurrection three times in this critical stretch, and each and every time he will have to rebuke a disciple or two or twelve trying to get ahead.

At the end of this section, after being taught repeatedly that the first shall be last and the path of the disciple is the way of submission and service, Jesus tells them one final time what awaits him in Jerusalem.

James and John then ask Jesus to be seated at his right and left hand in glory...at the end of a long semester in Getting Behind 101, they are still trying to get ahead.

Jesus then lays it on them as clearly as he can in a climactic crescendo:

*whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,*

*and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*

*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

Then Jesus heals a blind man, who immediately sees, and follows him...which is to say, he gets behind him.

Inspired by this section of Mark's gospel through which we will travel and wrestle this fall, "Get behind" is the theme for our stewardship emphasis which will hit full stride in October.

Hopefully you will be with us for brunch on October 4 between services to hear the details.

For now, it is more than enough to say that our call and our challenge is to be a people living in a world obsessed with getting ahead who are learning with Peter to get behind. This is not just for Sunday School children; this is especially for us unruly adults so accustomed to having our way, so enamored with control that we invent buttons to turn on the TV or unlock the car from far away and then adjust the weather in our own private seat in that car to our individual specifications.

Why should we expect our children to be content and quiet in the back of a station wagon to South Dakota when we don't drive to the store without optimizing our personal comfort? Nobody is making infomercials or generating Internet pop up ads calling us Satan and telling us to get behind--and if they did, we would label them terrorists, not teachers.

Nobody lasts very long in American industry inviting us to set down our remote control and take up our cross.

Nobody whose motto is "Have It Someone Else's Way" will ever retain the throne as our Burger King.

We need plenty of teaching and shaping and rebuking and discipline and practice to learn to get behind, and we aren't going to get it from society or the self-help or management theory sections, because everyone is writing about leadership and nobody is exploring followership.

It will probably take a lot of spit in our eyes and harsh words from Jesus to get us to see and to follow.

The very air we breathe is poisoned with the idolatry of money and self, and that air is thick and heavy and so often suffocating.

We are trained to think we need so much more than we do.

We are conditioned to obsess about our appearance and resume and reputation, to spend so much of our time and energy on Myspace and in the mirror carefully crafting a perfect image for ourselves that is too meticulous to maintain, too impossible to uphold.

We become trapped under the weight of unsustainable expectations and a bloated assumption that all the world is watching us and caring what we do or think or say or look like at every moment, which is why we need Twitter because Facebook isn't fast enough.

This is why we need to go with our children to Sunday School, to meet the one who loves us enough to get up in our face and say, Get over yourself.

You don't have to suffer the unyielding stress of being so important.

Lose what you cavalierly call life and take up something lighter, like a cross.

Lose yourself in a cause greater and bigger and heavier and holier and more important and beautiful and blessed than you can ever manage to be by yourself.

Set your mind on divine things instead of human things, and remember that the way of the divine, from the dawn of creation to the dusk of the cross, is letting go.

God shares, God sends, God empowers, God forgives...why then clutch and hoard and grasp?

Let go of the guile and the guilt, the burden and the Blackberry, the weight and the worry of being so oppressively Important.

Your life is too valuable to be considered a human thing.

Treat it like the divine thing it is...and let it go.

Get yourself in perspective, and in the proper position.

Get behind me.

Because we are now more than ever trapped in the twin shackles of money and self, paranoid of losing what we do have and haunted by lacking what we don't, we need to hear the hard and liberating gospel word inviting us to get behind.

It is why when we talk about stewardship we will stress again the wise, biblical practice of tithing, the unconditional giving away of the first ten percent of our income to God.

What is so radical and exhilarating (and daunting and scary) about this practice is that it spits in the blind eyes of money and self.

We relinquish the money and the control...we take the first ten percent and burn it.

Our first priority is not us.

Our very first slice doesn't go into savings, but into losings.

Our very first check is a step back, a chance to position ourselves behind rather than reaching to get ahead...because ahead of Jesus is somewhere we really don't want to be.

As awful as following and cross-carrying sounds, it's not as bad as what Jesus faces.

He is the fullback who has to throw the crushing block; he is the bicyclist up front who has to do all the hard work so we can draft.

He invites us to get behind him because he loves us enough to protect us from what he in his longer vision sees is coming.

Get behind me, so that you will get there.

Jesus sees things beyond our short horizons...threats as well as joys we cannot foresee much less fathom.

He sees his own resurrection before our eyes can even adjust to his death.

He looks ahead and sees that we will lose our life, and that all the bluster and bombast and braggadocio of our self-centered, market-scripted lives is leading us to a grave stone marking a big pile of nothing, that those of us so desperately trying to save our lives will all eventually lose them.

But he sees beyond that too, beyond the loss to the great surprise God has saved for the day when God saves us, beyond the cross to resurrection.

He sees where both the smooth trail of self-gratification and the rocky climb of servanthood lead, and he grabs the cross to guide the way.

He is, from our vantage point, choosing the wrong route.

The outlook will improve only if we get behind him.