

Sermon Mark 9:38-50
September 26, 2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I have a very clear recollection of a conversation some years ago with a group of ecumenical clergy from the community in which we were then living. The discussion focused on church boundaries. Specifically, what are those boundaries and do grace and salvation exist beyond the walls and canonical limits of the Church? This is a question with which the Church has struggled from its very beginning. Some in that group that day were quite emphatic: There is no possibility of grace or salvation outside the sacrament of baptism and a real commitment to the Body of Christ, that is, the Church. Others of us were not so sure. As the Roman Catholic priest observed, he knew many people of other faiths who frankly lived holier lives, lives more in keeping with the example of Jesus Christ, than many who were part of his own tradition. And mind you, he was the Roman Catholic priest in the community!!

His perspective raised some vital questions for our group then, and does so just as much in our present day:

What do we, as Christians, do when we encounter others who have different religious and theological understandings in our world?

Where do we stand, and how do we interact, with those who don't follow us, that is, do not believe as we do?

How do we see others, that is, how do we judge them, when we know that they are not "one of us"?

The disciples in this morning's passage from Mark are struggling with very similar questions. And they are doing so at one of the less happy moments in their travels with Jesus. First, in the verses preceding this passage, they had utterly failed in exorcising a demon from a young boy even though they had been commissioned by Jesus himself to do so. Then we learned in last week's reading from Mark that they still were hoping to be great, as the world understands greatness. Jesus had to emphatically remind them that, in his Father's kingdom, true greatness is rooted in a willingness to be last of all and servant of all. Instead of seeking greatness by way of making a place for ourselves in society by way of power, prestige, and material wealth, the true follower of Jesus must first and always seek to make a place for others in the world, particularly those who were dismissed by the world as worthless and powerless.

Now, they are upset because someone who is not one of them, not one of that inner circle, seems to be doing a better job of casting out demons in Jesus' name than they

were! And so they tell him to cut it out, because he is not one of them! Obviously, they are jealous, and frankly my friends, jealousy is never helpful.

Jesus is very clear in his response, even though I am quite certain that those disciples were disappointed by his response: "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will soon be able after to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

What a beautiful insight our Lord is putting before us! The grace of God embodied in him is offered to all, and one does not have to be within the "inner circle" to experience that grace, to live by that grace, and to share that grace with others. Jesus did not come to build a "members only" clubhouse. He came in order to draw ALL the world to himself.

And he doesn't stop there. He tells the disciples to stop looking for stumbling blocks "out there" and instead work with great love and intensity to make sure that they themselves never become stumbling blocks for others. I've got to tell you, Mark 9:42 is for me one of the most humbling and frankly frightening verses in the whole New Testament: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better if a great millstone were hung round your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Please notice that he does not unpack the phrase "believe in me". What does that mean? I'm not exactly sure, but I have a feeling that it is much bigger and far wider than anything I've ever come up with in my lifetime.

In our physical world, stumbling blocks tend to be external to us; the shoe in the middle of the floor unseen at night, the bedpost that catches our toe when we cut the corner, the patch of ice unseen on the winter ground, the step that we forget is there. But in our inner lives, in our souls and spirits, these stumbling blocks are part of us; they exist in our limbs, in our flesh. I do not believe that Jesus actually wants us to start lopping off pieces of ourselves. Rather, he is pointing out the harm we can do, both to ourselves and to others, when we fall into habits of seeing, thinking, and acting in ungodly ways that blind us to who we really are, who our neighbors are, and who God really is. The reality is that our distorting of the Gospel to suit our own tastes is sin, and that sin distorts our faith view, renders us blind, and in our blindness, we become the stumbling blocks that Jesus warns us about. We trip and fall, and too often, we trip others in the process.

Ultimately, these stumbling blocks are not so much about personal behaviors, but actually about the ways we relate to God. Pride, Greed, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger, and Sloth are called the seven deadly sins for good reason. These are so often the stumbling blocks over which we trip, our vision of God broken and distorted, and in doing so, we take so many others down with us.

Jesus again is very clear about we must do. Do whatever it takes to remove the stumbling block from our lives. Pride? Rip it out. Greed? Cut it off. Lust? Gouge it out. Anger? Amputate. My friends, this is not about punishment. This is a matter of

healing, a matter of life over death. Furthermore, as the Holy Spirit works in us to remove these stumbling blocks, I expect that we will find that the boundaries of God's love, life, and peace are infinitely far more expansive than we ever could know and understand left to our own thoughts and devices.

Or, as my friend the Roman Catholic Priest observed, "The Muslim offering a drink of water to the homeless man is probably far closer to the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim than the Christian who wanders by mumbling to himself, "Get a job."

Amen.