

Sunday Lesson – September 26, 2021

GOSPEL: Mark 9: 38-50



Context

“Coming from the villages of Caesarea Philippi where Jesus first announced his suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection (8:31), Jesus is now moving south toward Jerusalem and is passing through Galilee where he announces his passion and resurrection for the second time (9:30-31). Once again the disciples misunderstand Jesus’ messiahship (9:32-34) and again Jesus teaches them concerning discipleship (9:35-37).

The text for our consideration continues the theme of the disciples’ misunderstanding. They question Jesus concerning an exorcist who is not one of them and is casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but “was not following us” (9:38b). *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50-2)*

Insight

“Jesus’ teaching moment comes in his words to the disciples: “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me” (9:39). Jesus’ battle against Satan (1:12-13) and ongoing presence of evil takes all the resources possible: “Whoever is not against us is for us” (9:40).

Not only is Jesus’ ministry against the powers of evil, but his ministry is a pattern for all who reach out in love to the neighbor: “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (9:41). Serving the neighbor is not to gain reward but to live in response to the neighbor and serving out of love and in the name of Christ.

The closing admonition of our text is the claim and promise of God and Jesus’ call to live as God’s intended purpose in creating us for life: “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (9:50b). This is the call, identity, and promise of discipleship which is the peace that Jesus offers to all his followers. We are called by Jesus into a cosmic engagement against the powers of evil and injustice and to serve our neighbor in love.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50-2)*

Gospel Reading

“John spoke up, “Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t in our group.” Jesus wasn’t pleased. “Don’t stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath slam me. If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice. “On the other hand, if you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you’ll soon wish you hadn’t. You’d be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck. “If your hand or your foot gets in God’s way, chop it off and throw it away. You’re better off maimed or lame and alive than the proud owner of two hands and two feet, godless in a furnace of eternal fire. And if your eye distracts you from God, pull it out and throw it away. You’re better off one-eyed and alive than exercising your twenty-twenty vision from inside the fire of hell. “Everyone’s going through a refining fire sooner or later, but you’ll be well-preserved, protected from the *eternal* flames. Be preservatives yourselves. Preserve the peace.” The Message

What It Could Mean?

“This Sunday Mark considers the church’s boundaries and internal responsibilities. The radical character of discipleship is

focal, consistent with last Sunday's mandate that each of Jesus' followers become "last of all and servant of all" (9:35).

Mark 9:38-41 encourages a broad-minded attitude toward those who provide relief but operate outside the disciples' circle: "Whoever is not against us is for us" (9:40). Here Jesus commends in strongest terms ("truly I tell you"; see 3:28; 8:12; 9:1) the reward due anyone who quashes diabolical forces in his name (3:23-27)—whether or not they are "following us" (9:38: our way of being church)—or another who offers a simple cup of water to disciples "because you are Christ's by name" (9:41, my translation). Adhering to the spirit of 9:35-37, 9:38-41 stresses gracious reception of anyone whose action, bold or modest, genuinely conforms to Jesus' character.

The contrast established in 9:39-41 and 9:42-50 is that between nurturance of Christian believers and infliction of injuries that cause them to lose their faithful footing. The cognate verb *skandalizō* (NRSV: "put a stumbling block before" [Mark 9:42] or "cause to stumble" [9:43, 45, 47]) conveys the sense of tripping up someone for downfall. While Matthew often employs the term (10:42; 11:11; 18:6, 10, 14), only in 9:42 does Mark use "little ones" (*tōn mikrōn*) to refer to one's fellow believers. It is conceptually related to the child (to *paidion*) who should be received "in my name" (9:36-37). Harming "one of these little ones" invites punishment worse than being hurled into the sea with a huge grinding stone "hung around your neck" (9:42).

"Salt is good": like cross-bearing discipleship, a sacrificial preservative prevents the church from insipidity (9:50ab; compare Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19). "Salt," self-sacrifice for the gospel, promotes communal peace that quells self-centeredness and one-upmanship (9:50c; 9:33-34, 38).

Repeatedly Mark's Jesus heals bodies diseased and deformed (1:31-34, 40-41; 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 5:1-43; 7:31-37; 8:22-26; 10:46-52). Because "he did not speak to them except in parables"

(4:33), he cannot be literally advocating self-mutilation in 9:43, 45, or 47. These are stark remarks, intended to grab us by the scruff of the neck and shake us to our senses of the grim consequences that disciples invite when they abuse one another or anyone else.

When you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. (Flannery O'Connor, 1925-1964)

Let's take a hard look at our treatment of little ones who believe in Jesus. Are we supporting them as they totter, or strewing rocks and fences and walls that break them down? Jesus' family is expansive (Mark 3:31-35); the church faces a reckoning. If a bacterial soul isn't disinfected now, its treatment later will be a helluva lot worse." (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by C. Clifton Black*)

Readings for Further Study

- [Luke 9: 49-50/Matthew 12:27](#) *Luke version of 38-40*
- [Romans 14:19/Matthew 5:22](#) *Don't trip up others, share the life of Jesus/Words kill*

Thought for the Day

"The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." ~ *Zephaniah 3:17*

A Prayer

Jesus, bless what you have given, feed our souls with bread from heaven; guide and lead us all the way, in all that we may do and say. **Amen.**