

Mark 9:38 John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” 39 But Jesus said, “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. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 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.

Mark 9:42 “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

Mark 9:49 “For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

A member of my Bible study group remembered a short story that she read in school. The short story was entitled, “Clothes Makes the Man” and its author was Henri Duvernois.

In that story three robbers planned to rob a wealthy home on a busy street. Two of the gang would do the job. The third robber, a man named Tango would stand watch in a policeman’s uniform. Anyone passing by would not suspect a problem since there would be a policeman on patrol.

Now Tango was not the all that smart, but from the very beginning the uniform began to change his outlook. It fit well. It made his hulking body look good. He liked the fact that he had a shiny whistle, just like a real policeman.

And so he began to act like a policeman. He proudly gave a salute to a passing police lieutenant, helped an old woman across the street, and even decided to take a drunk who was disturbing the peace to jail.

At this moment his two fellow robbers came running out of the house they were robbing to stop him. One robber said, “You blockhead. You’ll ruin the whole job. What are you doing?” And then he struck him across the face.

Something snapped inside Tango. He remembered the lieutenant answering his salute. He remembered the gratitude and admiration of the old lady he helped across the street. Tango liked playing the role of policeman.

And so as his companions looked on in horror, Tango stuffed the shiny whistle into his mouth and “blew a salvo of blasts long enough to bring all the police in Paris.” He yelled, “Crooks, robbers! I arrest you. I arrest you in the name of the law.”

I guess sometimes clothes do make the man.

THE UNAUTHORIZED EXORCIST

In today’s lesson from Mark we have a similar story, the story of the unauthorized exorcist. It seems that someone has been casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

The disciple John was concerned. He came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

But, here’s the surprise in this short story. Jesus replies,

“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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.”

Jesus seems to think that if a person acts like a disciple that person may become a disciple. If a person does what faith requires, then that “bad actor” just might be changed into a follower.

NOT ONE OF US

That’s absolutely the opposite of how we often think about faith. We think that faith begins when someone joins our group and becomes as John put it, “one of us.”

The disciples are sure that Jesus doesn’t want any unauthorized exorcists running around driving out demons in his name. You can understand why.

These past few weeks we've been talking about the fact that in Mark's gospel Jesus was always commanding his disciples and those that he healed to not tell anyone about it. Jesus didn't want anyone misrepresenting his message and mission. After all Jesus' own disciples didn't have a clue about the coming kingdom.

So John and the other disciples told this unauthorized exorcist to stop. If they, the inner circle of disciples couldn't openly heal in Jesus' name, what right did this man have to heal in the name of Jesus?

Who is allowed to speak for Jesus? The history of the church is a history of people straining to decide that question. Who is "one of us?"

We have argued (and continue to argue) over how to do communion, who is allowed to be a minister, and who controls the church property. We spend much time enforcing the boundaries of the church. We want to make sure that no unauthorized ministry occurs on our watch.

And yet here we have Jesus telling a disciple, "Don't sweat it. If he's doing the right thing in my name, then he's on our side! If someone puts on the uniform of faith they will be changed forever."

The great German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to say something like this to people who were having doubts, "Do what faith requires and perhaps you will find that you have faith."

In other words, sometimes we can act our way into believing instead of believing our way into acting. If we do something, even something small in the name of Christ, it changes us for the better. It changes us forever.

SLOW LEARNERS

Now just because Jesus says something doesn't mean that his disciples will believe it. In fact in our study of Mark we have learned that just the opposite is true.

There is a theme that runs throughout the gospels.

First, the disciples are puzzled by what Jesus says. Second, they ignore what Jesus has to say. Third, they do the exact reverse of what Jesus told them to do. And then fourth, Jesus chastises the disciples for the lack of faith and reteaches the same lesson ... again and again and again.

It would be funny if it weren't so sad. Those disciples sure were slow to learn. Good thing that we aren't like that.

Oh wait. We are like that aren't we? Even today we obsess over who is in and who is out. Jesus tells us not to worry about it.

In fact, if we are too harsh and judgmental in our evaluation of others we may even prevent people from coming to faith. Our actions in the church may be a stumbling block to faith.

I was taught in my youth that if you don't believe the right things about Jesus you're going to hell. In this passage Jesus says, "If your judgmental attitude keeps people from coming to faith, you're in danger of going to hell!"

RELIGIOUS HELL

In other words, the people who are most in danger of "hell" are the religious people, the people who make all the rules and decide who's in and who's out.

Once again Jesus is making me very nervous.

Why? He's talking about me. I'm one of those religious officials who determines who is in and who is out.

I've been on the Committee on Ministry and the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, and we don't let just anyone preach and teach in Jesus' name. Ministers have to be one of us. They have to be trained in a seminary, preferably in a Presbyterian seminary. They have to answer all the questions the right way, the Presbyterian way.

Now to be fair we do have a point, and John had a point. Ministers need to be "one of us." I've seen the results of what happens when people are not trained in the way of Jesus.

Much harm can be done in the name of Jesus. Unauthorized exorcists can be dangerous!

But, that needs to be tempered by the message of this passage. Often God works outside the lines of what we consider to be kosher. God works through ministry that is not authorized by the church. God brings people to faith in ways that are not what we would expect.

And we need to make sure that we are not getting in God's way. We don't want to inadvertently become a stumbling block to faith.

LOST SHEEP

Jesus is always looking for the sheep that are lost. And that causes Jesus to go beyond the boundaries of what is considered kosher.

Jesus teaches and preaches in "Gentile" country. Jesus hangs out with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus heals those who are considered enemies. And in today's lesson Jesus authorizes the work of an exorcist who is not a part of the inner circle of disciples.

What Jesus teaches and what Jesus does is always a surprise to the disciples.

Do you think that Jesus still has some surprises for us even today? I do.

The Spirit of God in Christ is still at work in places and in ways that we cannot imagine. And it is our jobs to recognize that work and pitch in ... or at the very least make sure that we do not find ourselves working against God.

The primary job of the church is evangelism. In other words the first thing all of us are charged to do is bring people to Jesus. And, according to this passage, the thing that will bring condemnation upon the church is to do things and say things that will prevent people from coming to Jesus.

I think Jesus sees this unauthorized exorcist as a lost sheep that is on the road to faith. And Jesus wants to make sure that his bumbling, judgmental disciples don't put obstacles in the way of the one who is on the way to believing.

HARSH LANGUAGE

That's why Jesus' language is so harsh.

Jesus said, "It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a cement overcoat than to prevent one of these little ones from coming to faith. It would be better to cut off your hand or your foot or pluck out your eye instead of going to hell because you kept someone else from going to heaven."

And Jesus used this harsh language not only to warn disciples back then but also to warn disciples here and now.

We've talked about this many times. In the name of Jesus terrible things have been done (and continue to be done). And this prevents people from coming to faith.

Jesus tells us to cut out those things that get in the way of faith. Of course Jesus is speaking metaphorically in this passage. He doesn't want anyone to commit suicide or practice self-mutilation.

But, Jesus does want us to take evangelism seriously. Jesus wants us to cut out our judgmental talk in favor of reaching out to others.

Jesus doesn't want us to condemn those who use his name in a way that is not kosher. Instead, Jesus asks us to reach out to those people and pave the way for a deeper faith.

THE WAY

I wonder what happened to this unauthorized exorcist. Like so many people in the Bible he makes a cameo appearance and is never heard again, at least in the Bible.

But, I like to imagine that this exorcist came to a greater faith. I suspect that when this man called upon the name of Jesus and delivered people from their demons, he was delivered from his own demons and came to believe in a deeper way.

That's how it often happened in the Bible. People were always on the way to a deeper faith.

In fact, one of the earliest names for the Christian faith was "The Way." (See, for example Acts 19:9) In other words those early Christians understood that they hadn't arrived when it came to faith. They were on the way with Jesus. They were taking a journey of faith with Jesus, and they hadn't arrived.

It was a process. And the best they could do was help each other along the way, and try keep the little ones from stumbling.

SALTED WITH FIRE

This was not an easy journey for those first Christians, and it is not an easy journey for us either. Jesus says that in order to make a difference in the world his followers have to be "salted with fire."

There's an artist in the Methodist Church in Winter Park, Jan Richardson who gave me some insight into that phrase. On her website she has a beautiful painting entitled "Salted with Fire."

Jan wrote that she thought about how potters use salt to create works of unexpected beauty. They throw salt into the kiln and this alters the pot in a way that can't be predicted or controlled.

She writes, "The potter has to trust that when the salt is given to the fire, it will do its work; that, blessed by the intention and focus the potter brings, the salt will make way for the wild beauty that will come."

But, of course in order for the potter to create this wild beauty he or she has to give up control. And that is what needs to happen to us as well.

A TESTIMONY

Did you get a chance to read the Stephen Ministry testimonial in the e-letter this past week? For those who didn't see it, it was essentially the story of a man who wanted to follow Jesus, who attended church each week and did the best that he could.

But, then he was salted with fire. Something wild and unpredictable came into his life. He lost his job. He needed help.

He found that help in the form of the Stephen Ministry that his church started. And through the help he received, he found a deeper faith and a passion for ministry that has started him on a different path.

Jesus once said that Christians are to be the salt of the earth. I think that means we must have the courage to give up the illusion that we can control our lives and instead trust the wild, unpredictable beauty of God's salvation.

We do not see ourselves in charge of the ministry that we do together. We do not see ourselves as the ones who make the judgment about who is in and who is out.

Instead, we are salt. We bring the flavor, the saltiness, the good news about God's salvation as revealed in Jesus to a world that so desperately needs it.

We ask people to try on the uniform of faith. And quite often their lives are transformed by that challenge.

God keep us from being a stumbling block to those who are on the way to faith. Instead, help us pave the way. Help us truly be the salt of the earth, that heavenly flavoring that will one day change everything.

Amen.