

09, September 27,

“IN CHRIST’S NAME”

Mark 9: 38-50

INTRODUCTION:

- This is another difficult passage where Jesus is teaching a whole new and different way of going about life. – Jesus turns all our expectations on their head- so put on your helmets! The disciples have been arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus tells them a little child is the greatest.
- In today’s scripture, the disciples think they are greater than an exorcist, who is not one of the twelve. Jesus refers to him as a little one in the faith, so the lesson today focuses on what our attitude should be to those whom we regard as younger, weaker in the faith.
- Please don’t take Jesus words literally in this reading where he urges self mutilation. Hebrew always prefers to speak concretely rather than abstractly. Jesus is speaking metaphorically.
- Today’s reading closes with a lot of references to salt. Keeping our saltiness, being salted with fire. Salt is a common image for discipleship- for that quality of Christian living that seasons, has an impact on the world around us. And so we are to keep our saltiness, our faithfulness.
- “salted with fire” is a little harder to wrap our minds around. It probably embraces the other use for salt which is to cleanse, to heal, and fire is an image that evokes the Holy Spirit. So we have an image here of the Holy Spirit cleansing us, renewing us so that we can be salted, so we can have an impact on the world.
- Let us consider for a moment those places in our lives that NEED cleansing and renewing, and let us open our minds, our hearts, to receive into those places the Word of God according to the gospel of Mark 9:38-50.

SERMON

Last Friday evening I was rushing through the Ukranian Festival crowd to get to a dinner engagement, when suddenly I stumbled and fell headlong onto the sidewalk.

If that’s ever happened to you, you’ll know the kind of stillness this generates in a crowd a kind of uncertainty, a distancing, - Should they get involved?—what had made me fall, out of the blue like that- was it drink? Not if you know me.

And no, it was not an uneaten perogie that I slipped on- I just didn’t pick up my feet high enough, and whomp, there I was, at the feet of what appeared, from where I was, to be a very large man, He was kind, though. Asked if I was alright, lifted me up and placed me on my feet as if I were a small child, which is how I felt.

No one wants to stumble publicly, and the disciples in today’s scripture have stumbled.

What makes it worse, is that they actually believe they've done something good. They report to Jesus how they tried to stop a man who had been healing in Christ's name.

Why did they try to stop him?- well, he wasn't one of the twelve. Was it a kind of quality control measure- self protection of some kind? He wasn't one of them. If he did something untoward, using Christ's name, it might reflect back on THEM, perhaps. How can the infant church grow and thrive unless we exercise some control!.....At any rate they expect Jesus will be pleased with their diligence.

But he's not. He says anyone who uses my name, will not be able to speak ill of me- he's not an enemy- he's someone who's opening the door to faith, a little one on the pathway to faith.

How dare you, Jesus says, put a stumbling block in his way. Jesus is really angry- he uses the strongest language here- it would be better, he says, to be forcibly drowned than to do what you have done (ouch)-

The message is clear: The twelve have judged another to be unworthy of using Christ's name, they've caused someone to stumble when they should have been the ones to lift that person up. And so, they have themselves stumbled and fallen headlong.

How hard for them to grasp Jesus' vision, Jesus entirely new way of looking at the world. It has been said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe that there two kinds of people in the world, and those who don't.

Jesus is part of the latter group. Jesus simply sees people, with no distinctions. All are made out of dust. All return to dust. All are breathed through with the breath of God. One people, one world.

It's hard for us to grasp this vision. Everything we've learned from kindergarten on has taught us to distinguish and to separate, to identify what belongs together and what does not belong. Our thinking is binary: we get clarity as we distinguish one idea from another. Everything we've learned leads us to judge and to separate.

I'm reminded of a story that I shared with you once before. It's a story that some Lithuanian man probably still recounts today as he shares a beer with his friends, the day he's out in the forest and needs a ride. A car draws up, the driver waves him over. This is his lucky day!-

The driver rolls down his window , says something in English- but he can't understand, so he just opens the back door and starts to climb in. The driver starts shouting and yelling "No, No." This he understands...

But right then the driver slams his foot on the gas, "and there I am", he'd say, " , one foot in the car, clinging on to the roof for dear life, the car is swerving crazily from one side of the road to the other.

"I somehow manage to haul myself into the car, I shut the door, my heart is beating like crazy. And then this madman slams on the brakes and keeps yelling something at me. And the women are talking to him in low voices.

Now I understand, this man is crazy and I've done something to set him off. I open the door and jump out- I'm terrified he'll come after me, so I back away slowly -I show him with my hands that I mean no harm. If I believed in God I would thank God and every angel in heaven for getting me away from that lunatic alive."

I know the story because I was one of the women in the car and the driver was my brother- not exactly a lunatic, just someone who has lived in South Africa and has personally on separate occasions been kidnapped, robbed, mugged, and hijacked.

In South Africa, if a stranger gets into your car it's in order to shoot you and to take your car. So, my brother did what he had to do to "shake the assailant." He had of course misread this particular situation. The fear that rose in him blinded him as to how benign this stranger really was.

What is it in us that causes us to try to shake off other people, that causes us to separate ourselves from them? That causes us to judge others falsely – or to judge them at all- something Jesus warns us not to do.

Do we stumble over differences of race? or gender? or sexual orientation? or religion? Or age? Or upbringing? There is in Jesus' words today a radical call to acceptance and inclusion of all people. A call to recognise that the holy spirit is working not only in and through us and our kind, but through others too.

Our United Church creed declares, we believe in God who works in us AND OTHERS by the Spirit. (R)

In today's scripture, Jesus condemns the action of cutting off another, judging another who minister's in Christ's name. He calls us beyond our binary thinking, beyond our "this and that" thinking; beyond our "us and them" thinking. "Be at peace with one another", Jesus says.

How shall we be at peace? Well, there is something in us that is the cause of our judging, excluding and separating, and whatever it is, Jesus says, amputate it. It may feel like we cannot function without it, because we're so used to it, but Jesus says we'll do ourselves less harm by amputating it than by holding onto it.

To go back to that ominous day in Lithuania, ironically, our destination was actually an underground nuclear missile launch pad, left behind by the Soviets, with missiles still aimed at the West.

It was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence with signage warning that the area was radioactive and that we entered at our own risk!

Now I'm not one for exposing myself deliberately to radiation. I resist even dental X rays if I can, but I have to say that of the 30 or so people gathered for the tour, not one of us heeded the signs. Would you?

Despite our personal recklessness, there's a part of me that says "wise people in authority should not allow a dangerous, toxic structure to be open to the public? Why then does it remain as a tourist attraction?"

It is of course a money maker, and Lithuania's horribly poor, but they keep it, most likely, because it's a monument to their past. It's part of their history, part of who they are. And so they ignore it's toxicity.

We all hold onto monuments to our past- some of our houses are cluttered with stuff we can't get rid of, because of the emotional connections to our personal histories; and our minds are also cluttered with memories, emotions, attitudes that we can't let go of.

Some of what we hold onto is toxic, but we cling to it. It's our history. It tells us who we are. –

Who would we be, if we let go of our little grudges? Or God forbid, the big ones? If we let go of the injustices that have been done to us- that colour the way we see others? Who would we be if we let go of our judgments of others? Let go of our own fear, our envy, our pride?

Do these cause us to sin, to fall short of Jesus vision of one people, one world? Do they cause us to exclude people from our midst? Do we judge and disempower others because of the toxic stuff inside of us? Then we must get rid of what is toxic, Jesus says.

We're to look to our own saltiness, our own faithfulness, Jesus says, and not worry about cleansing others. It's a difficult road we're called to walk. And we all stumble on this pathway.

But if, when we stumble, we fall at God's feet, so to speak, if we come to God in humility, God's hand will lift us up, as a beloved little one, and set our feet on right paths. In God's eyes we are all little ones, on the pathway to faith, and through God's power, we can find the means to be at peace with one another.

We find our hope in Jesus promise: that we will all be salted with fire. That through a power greater than ourselves we can and will be cleansed, purged, renewed, healed.

God is waiting, longing to pour God's Spirit into us, to salt us with fire, to cleanse us, renew us, to make us useful. God longs to give to each of us what we need to be at peace with one another, to pour into us the grace and acceptance, those qualities of Jesus Christ, through which the love of God is made known..

When we are "salted" in this way, when we display Christ like qualities of grace, inclusion, welcome, others will experience through us that inner expansiveness that is the knowledge and love of God.

This is our calling as Christians, to look to our own saltiness, our own faithfulness, and be at peace with one another, so that God's love may be known by all.

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory, Amen.

