

Sunday September 29th, 2024

Mark 9:38-50
“Watch Where You Step”

Late one evening a traveller's car broke down in a desolate area. There was no place to go other than a monastery that he had passed some miles back. So, the man walked back to the monastery and when he arrived, he explained his situation, and the monks welcomed him in, gave him food and drink, and a place to sleep, and offered in the morning to repair his vehicle. However, during the night, the man heard the strangest sound, and he was both frightened, and intrigued.

In the morning at breakfast, he asked the monks about the strange sound and was told in no uncertain terms, “We can't tell you, you're not a monk.” The man was disappointed but he graciously thanked his hosts and was on his way. Some years later, the same traveler had car problems again, and once again was forced to turn to the monastery for assistance. Once again, they were glad to help and once again he heard that strange noise during the night.

He asked again what the noise was but once again they told him, “We cannot tell you, you are not a monk. The traveller replied, “All these years I have wanted to know what that sound was. I'm dying to know. How do you become a monk?” The monks said, “First you must travel the earth and learn to speak every language of every culture. Then you must do one kind deed for every man, woman and child, you encounter in your travels.

Then you must climb to the top of the highest mountain and count the stars in the heavens. When you have completed this, you are well on your way to becoming a monk.” Undaunted the man accepted the task. And some forty-five years later he returned to the monastery and knocked on the door. “I have traveled the world, learned six-thousand languages, did good deeds for billions of people, I almost froze to death on that mountain, and there are 17 trillion stars.”

The monks were amazed, “Congratulations,” they said, “you are close to being a monk of the highest order. We shall now take you to the source of that sound. The monks led the man to a large wooden door and said to the man, “The source of the sound is behind that door”. “But how do I open it?” “You must first memorize the Old Testament in Hebrew.” The man was disappointed, but he went to his room, and in a few months, he could recite the Old Testament in Hebrew, and he was given a key to the wooden door.

He rushed down to unlock it only to find behind the door a locked bronze door. “How do I get the key for the bronze door? He asked. “For that” they said, “you must memorize the New Testament in the original Greek.” He was so close now that the man decided to finish the task and soon had memorized the New Testament and he received the key to the bronze door, only to open it and find a locked golden door.

“This last door can only be accessed after you have spent one year in the dungeon living on only bread and water.” And so, he lived this way for a year and emerged weary and emaciated and had to be helped to the source of the strange sound. With trembling hands, he unlocked the wooden door, the bronze door, and was handed the key to open the golden door. Behind it lay the source of the strange sound, and he was sure without a doubt it was worth all the effort and pain he endured.

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And so, with great anticipation he swung open the door and you know what he saw? Sorry, I can't tell you. You're not a monk. (Hot Illustrations 4, p. 94) It's frustrating isn't it, when people withhold information from us. When you get this sense that you are on the outside looking in.

It is even worse when those who hold the information or position, appoint themselves as the gatekeepers, deciding who is in and who is out. Do you remember years ago the E.F. Hutton ads on television? E.F. Hutton was a brokerage house dispensing investment advice. In one commercial it pictures two men having a lunch in a very crowded and very noisy restaurant. The one man says during the conversation, "Well, E.F. Hutton says..."

Suddenly the whole restaurant goes eerily silent, and everyone is leaning in towards the two men to get the tidbit from E.F. Hutton. Yet, as I mentioned, there is something inside of us that takes a perverse pleasure at knowing something, that no one else knows, or being a part of something great that others are excluded from. I think that is part of the reason the disciples got their nose out of joint when another person was exorcising demons in Jesus' name.

In other words, "How dare this person, intrude on their exclusive position and use of Jesus' power." Even how John expresses the disciple's annoyance is quite telling, "We tried to stop him because he was not following us." Catch that? Following who? Us. I've been all over the gospel's and I've never heard Jesus, call people to follow his disciples. He exclusively calls people to follow "me".

I think there might also be some jealousy on the part of the disciples. John's report to Jesus seems to indicate that the person doing the exorcisms in Jesus' name was experiencing some success. The power of Jesus' name was not restricted to the twelve. But remember what happened just a few verses back in this chapter. Jesus comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration and encounters a boy who is possessed.

The disciples who had remained behind when Jesus went up the mountain had tried to exercise the evil spirit had failed. Maybe that failure was still raw in their collective memories. We also know that John and his brother James were not above seeking personal power and glory. Remember their mother's bold request that her two sons be given the seats of honour beside Jesus when his kingdom came.

Later in Mark chapter 10 after Jesus' sad encounter with the rich man wanting to find eternal life, Peter this time, reminds Jesus that they have left everything to follow him. It reads almost as if Peter wants his sacrifice validated, but more than that he wants to be seen as not at all like the rich man, who went away sad. This story also comes on the heels of the embarrassing scene of the disciples squabbling over who was the greatest.

Maybe taken together these events reveal in the disciple's minds that perhaps they're not so special after all. That they do not have an exclusive claim on Jesus, just because he called them, and teaches them things about his Kingdom. This scene also underscores once again what true discipleship is all about. Being a disciple was never meant to be an exclusive club. Jesus wants his disciples to broaden their vision of who is inside the kingdom. This is a point we need to hear especially in a church fragmented along many lines.

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That is denominational, doctrinal, racial, socio-economic, national, liberal/conservative, social-action/evangelical, charismatic/non-charismatic, and young/elderly. We are always tempted to regard Christians from the other side of the line as inferior—if we think of them as Christians at all.

Perhaps more to the point, there is an inherent temptation for ordained clergy to be jealous of our prerogatives and dismissive of laypersons who move into areas of ministry usually reserved for clergy. It is also true that laypersons serving in official positions can often be equally jealous of their authority. Christ calls us to put aside petty jealousies and to respect the gifts of those who work in his name.

Discipleship has always been open to anyone who seeks to do God's will through Christ's name. The use of Jesus name indicates the source of the unnamed healer's authority. Its why we end our prayers by saying "In Jesus' name". Whatever marvels of grace we experience come not from within ourselves but through the power and presence of Christ. Even giving someone a cup of cold water in Jesus' name has positive eternal consequences.

Its also why Jesus launches into a discussion regarding the nature of discipleship using three symbols. The first I have already mentioned, being that cup of cold water. The cup of water symbolises the act of generosity. A disciple is one who provides refreshment, renewal and cleansing. All this speaks of a disciple being someone who promotes an abiding life in others. Therefore, the unknown exorcist is a disciple, even if John does not know him.

The cup of cold water is not about the miraculous. It is about common decency and compassion. What does a cup of cold water cost us; but to the one who needs it is invaluable. I remember my grandmother Rich telling me a story about a time soon after she was married. My grandparents were married at the tail end of the depression. People were struggling everywhere with poverty and hunger.

One day, a man came to the door begging not for a handout but for a small task he could do to get a meal. Grandmother took pity on him and took him to her big backyard garden and asked the man to weed the garden and she would feed him. So, the man weeded the garden, and afterwards grandmother fed him, but she did more. She offered to let the man take a warm bath and she cleaned his clothes. Something the man hadn't experienced in weeks. This simple act rejuvenated the man and he left feeling more hopeful than he had in quite a while.

The second symbol Jesus talks about is a millstone. The word Jesus uses here is of a millstone too large for a person to lift. Jesus means a large flat stone, that was used to grind grain. Here in Canada, mills dotted the landscape, often powered by water to turn the heavy stone. In Jesus' day, the millstone was often turned by donkey power, or in some cases by slaves, forced to turn the heavy stone. Today, most milling is done by machinery in big factories.

The millstone, in Jesus' analogy, is something the disciple is to avoid. It represents burden, bondage and even the threat of death. A disciple is one who never places undo burdens on others or causes others to stumble in seeking abundant living.

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The consequences of causing someone to stumble is that of having the stone tied around your neck and tossed into the sea. In the Jewish mind, that would mean being denied a proper burial and such a threat was intolerable. The responsibility to avoid the millstone is so great, Jesus uses frightening images of self-mutilation to encourage us to avoid stumbling or causing someone else to stumble.

These exaggerated, or hyperbolic statements are meant to drive home the seriousness of discipleship, its responsibilities and costs. Jesus in no way is calling us to self harm even to avoid stumbling. In today's language to fully grasp Jesus' point, we might be better to render these words, "It is better to be without a hand, leg, or an eye, rather than stumble." The reference to hell here is the word Gehenna.

Gehenna was a valley near Jerusalem, where in ancient history human sacrifices were committed. In Jesus' day it was essentially a garbage dump. Fire burned constantly, to consume the refuse. Condemned prisoners often had their bodies dumped there. Wild dogs would prowl looking for food, "snarling, and gnashing their teeth". It is therefore better to be without a hand or foot, or eye than to be judged by God as unworthy of his Kingdom.

And then there is the symbol of salt. In this case, Jesus is using salt to describe how a disciple behaves or lives their life. It depicts adding a zest to life, using our unique abilities and that we are called to a distinct service. Salt also preserves but that use is not indicated here. It is all about seasoning. All of us know what bland food is like. Spend just a couple of days in hospital, and you get the point. No one goes to the hospital for the food.

I have visited hundreds of people in hospitals, over the years, and spent time inside as well and almost all people complain of the awful food. Maybe it is that way to encourage people to heal faster. The food is bad sometimes that their friends and family sneak snacks into them. Or go to any major hospital like Brantford and see all the patients, IV stand in tow, down in the Tim Hortons. Jesus is saying that there is a tendency for us to lose our saltiness. Lose our zest. In other words, we can become bland.

I take this to mean there is a danger in us as disciples, being: joyless, dour, and unpleasant to be around. We become the soup that everyone says needs salt. The sad fact is, that all of us know people we love who have lost their saltiness. Maybe we are one of those who has become bland. Taken together these three symbols describe exceptional ministry in the name of Jesus. Not just for clergy or missionaries, but for anyone who longs to follow Jesus.

However, there is one caveat and that is reference to being salted with fire. In the temple sacrificed meat was burned always with salt. (Lev. 2:13) The reference here may be of disciples being offerings and salted with persecution. Mark may have included this reference because at the time of writing the gospel, the church he was in was under severe persecution and he wanted to encourage the faithful.

Jesus final admonition in this passage is to be at peace with one another. A difficult task among Christ's followers if one thinks as John did, or one does not have salt within them.

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It is clearly a warning for the church to guard their hearts and to avoid pushing an agenda at all costs. In other words, rolling the millstone over people.

In 2004 Victor Yushchenko stood for the presidency of the Ukraine. Vehemently opposed by the ruling party Yushchenko's face was disfigured and he almost lost his life when he was mysteriously poisoned. This was not enough to deter him from standing for the presidency. On the day of the election Yushchenko was comfortably in the lead. The ruling party, not to be denied, tampered with the results.

The state-run television station reported "ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger Victor Yushchenko has been decisively defeated." In the lower right-hand corner of the screen a woman by the name of Natalia Dmitruk was providing a translation service for the deaf community. As the news presenter regurgitated the lies of the regime, Natalia Dmitruk refused to translate them. "I'm addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine" she signed. "They are lying and I'm ashamed to translate those lies. Yushchenko is our president."

The deaf community sprang into gear. They text messaged their friends about the fraudulent result and as news spread of Dmitruk's act of defiance increasing numbers of journalists were inspired to likewise tell the truth. Over the coming weeks the "Orange Revolution" occurred as a million people wearing orange made their way to the capital city of Kiev demanding a new election. The government was forced to meet their demands, a new election was held, and Victor Yushchenko became president.

Philip Yancey writes, "When I heard the story behind the orange revolution, the image of a small screen of truth in the corner of the big screen became for me an ideal picture of the church. You see we as a church do not control the big screen. (When we do, we usually mess it up.) Go to any magazine rack or turn on the television and you will see a consistent message. What matters is how beautiful you are, how much money or power you have.

Similarly, though the world includes many poor people, they rarely make magazine covers or news shows. Instead, we focus on the superrich, names like Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey. Our society is hardly unique. Throughout history, nations have always glorified winners, not losers.

Then, like the sign language translator in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, along comes a person named Jesus who says in effect, "*Don't believe the big screen – they're lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst, and the persecuted. Those who go through life thinking they're on top end up on the bottom. And those who go through life feeling they're on the bottom end up on the top. After all, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?*"

Source: Philip Yancey, What Good Is God, pages 184-186

What indeed!