

We have three distinct messages in today's Gospel, all of which serve the overarching message in Mark. First, we have John objecting to someone casting out demons in Jesus name, then we have Jesus teaching that placing stumbling blocks in front of "little ones" - well, it would be better to do some self mutilation. Finally, there is a brief teaching about salt being good. It's a dense passage and not easily understood with a simple reading, so let's break it down.

First of all, it appears that Jesus inner circle just doesn't seem to be very bright. At the beginning of chapter 9, where we are now, Jesus, Peter, James and John go to the mountain top where the three disciples see Jesus transfigured. These three disciples don't quite understand what they have witnessed. When they rejoin the rest of the disciples a great crowd has gathered, witnessing the remaining disciples failure to cure a boy possessed by a demon. Jesus explained that prayer was the missing ingredient. So isn't it a puzzle then, that John complains about an unnamed stranger who is able to cast out demons in Jesus name.

It could be that John is concerned about an unauthorized use of these deeds of power. After all, being a disciple means being a student,

learning from the master. And these disciples have been authorized by Jesus to cure the sick, cast out demons and share the good news. It could also be that John and the other disciples are mistrustful of those outside their group and remain ignorant about the mission and identity of Jesus. If that is the explanation, then the message in this story is really for the early church and it is also for us.

The early church did not develop its theology and understanding of the nature of Jesus until well into the third century. Mark's community may have been wary and mistrustful of other "followers of the way" whose message and way of doing things may have been different. Mark wants this community to understand that "whoever is not against us is for us." More importantly, Mark wants his community to understand that what IS important of a true disciple is their devotion to Jesus and to God and their service to humanity.

The fact that the stranger is unidentified is significant. It tells us that the important characteristics of a follower of Jesus does not include a pedigree, personal connections, or even personal familiarity with Jesus. Again, what matters is devotion to Jesus and to God and their service to

humanity.¹ There is nothing in this story that tells us that anything else is significant enough to separate us: not doctrine, not understandings of sacraments, not authority of scripture, not who might be saved. So denominational differences, much less differences within denominations, don't and shouldn't matter.

I think we may have seen this lived out earlier this week with Pope Francis' visit to America. More than just Catholics turned out to see him and more than just Catholics were eager to hear from him. Perhaps this is because this pontiff is actively living into the Gospel, as it is clear that his priorities, like Jesus' priorities are for those who are impoverished or unempowered. Further, this pontiff has been consistent with core Catholic teachings of the last century, some of which make me glad to be protestant.

Yet this Pope just beams with joy, he radiates love, kindness, humility and gentleness. His compassion is apparent even through the television set. His office gives him the weight and authority to be prophetic, and he uses that authority to do just that on behalf of those who have no power. His moral voice is compelling. He stretches me and helps me clarify my own thinking. His devotion to Jesus and his service to humanity is beyond

¹ Darry Trimiew, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospel: Mark* p 284.

question. There is more that unites us than divides us. This is the message Mark wanted his community to hear: if we are acting in Christ's name, if we are acting as Christ, then we are acting in concert with our Lord - there is no need for division.

There is a caveat, however, in the next section. Jesus is essentially saying "woe to you who put a stumbling block in front of the little ones. To fully appreciate this section, we must first understand what is meant by "stumbling block" and "little ones." What has been translated as stumbling block means an act so horrifying one can't stand to watch; it's also an action that causes diversion from faith or causes one to fall into sin. What comes to mind for me is someone being cruel enough to serve a drink to an alcoholic early in his or her recovery, assuring the individual that just one drink or one sip couldn't possibly hurt.

The "little one" refers back to the verses we heard last week, when Jesus put a little child among the disciples, saying whoever welcomes the child in his name welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him, welcomes God. "Little one" also refers to those who have no status, no wealth, no social standing, no power. Those who would put up such stumbling blocks

to the little ones are separating themselves from God - which is never what God wants. This separation from God is what Jesus understands as “hell.”

Now is Jesus really suggesting that should we act as a stumbling block, we should engage in self-mutilation? Theologians think not - rather they think that Mark is using the “body” metaphor to refer to groups of people and that these groups, represented as a “hand” and a “foot” and an “eye” should be cut off from the larger group. Any group that acts as a stumbling block, who would divert the “little ones” from faith or cause them to sin, should but cut off from the main body should such groups threaten the integrity of the whole body.² Using my alcoholic analogy, anyone in a 12-step program quickly learns that who one associates with matters and that sobriety is achieved by disassociating with anyone who would threaten that sobriety, and to be in the company of those who support sobriety.

The last three sentences of today’s Gospel are cryptic. Salt is considered “good.” It adds and enhances flavor, it functions as a preservative. Salt is all this and means to convey the sense that the disciples have been made holy, and we have been made holy, in our walk with Christ. To have this kind of salt in our community will preserve and

² Sharon H. Ringe, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, p 121.

enhance it as we walk with Christ in humility, as we appropriately give of ourselves to others and as we reach out and accept the people all around us. In some ways, this sounds like the development tasks of aging for as we live into our AARP years, we tend to become more tolerant and less judgmental, we take people as they come and find joy in their company. Each of us at our baptism have been claimed and marked as Christ's own forever. It is the journey of our lifetime to respond to being made holy and "the little ones" have been given over to our care. May we do it with love and with joy. AMEN.