

September 26, 2021
Mark 9:38-50
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Some of you remember that during my first year of seminary, my field education job was as an Assistant Chaplain at the State Prison in Trenton, New Jersey.

There were nine of us from the seminary who worked with the prison chaplain, Joe Ravenell, and we would meet together once a week to talk about our visits with the inmates, ask Joe's advice, and to help each other out. Early on in my year there, at one of our meetings, the Muslim chaplain, an imam, came to introduce himself to us. He was a nice guy, just a few years older than us, and he admitted to being a little envious that Joe had nine of us to help him out and while he was on his own.

After the introduction and some conversation, our chaplain said, "Let's have a word of prayer. Imam... would you mind?" and the imam—suddenly self-conscious that he'd overstayed his welcome, immediately stood up to leave, saying, "Sure, no problem."

But Joe stopped him...

"No, I meant would you lead us in prayer?"

And he did.

Whoever is not against us is for us.

In today's passage the apostle John comes to Jesus and tells him that there was someone casting out demons in Jesus' name and they tried to stop him. That's when Jesus admonishes them saying "whoever is not against us is for us."

Who is us?

One of the questions that comes up when we affirm Jesus as the Messiah is... what about others who

say the same? Are they part of us?

This raises the question right from the start about who has authority in the name of Christianity? Who has the right to invoke the name of Jesus? And, it wasn't long after the death of Jesus that the problem arose of opposing views in the name of Christianity with each side claiming the authority of Jesus. And we see this kaleidoscope of Christianity even today: our own Village and the surrounding Richland area has multiple churches—all in the name of Jesus—yet each unique in their approach, their self-understanding of their authority, and yes...often, like John, looking at other churches and questioning their ability to truly act in the name of Jesus.

This was certainly the situation in Mark's community. In Mark's day, thirty to forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were many different groups of Christians. Some were predominantly Jewish, others were from Gentile background. Some groups were centered in the city, others in the country, some were taken from groups of slaves and the lower classes, others from the educated groups of Roman society. These differences in life circumstances often led to differences in their understanding of Jesus. They differed on salvation and about who was a real Christian and who was not. But when we get caught-up in these questions and struggles, we lose the very essence of the message in Mark. Jesus is clear that he doesn't care who this mysterious outsider is; he turns the question to the people right in front of him (verse 42) how are *they* doing harm?

I'd go so far as to say that we do this to one another within congregations as well.

In the way we function as a community of faith. We are assigned our roles, our "lanes", and you better stay in in them lest you learn the hard way that "So-in so ALWAYS organizes that event; or a particular committee is responsible for that good deed you are about to innocently and kindly undertake, different age groups are siloed off from each other as if we stopped seeing that we are one

congregation, one family and we belong to each other. Yes, organization and assignments are critical, otherwise the church would look like a game of swarmball—like when preschoolers first learn soccer and have no concept of individual roles on the soccer field. So, they all swarm the ball, like bees, as it rolls over the field. If no one was in charge of making coffee on Sunday morning (don't you miss that?) how many would walk in with coffee just purchased at Hardings? And the swarming would continue to other parts of the ministry. But we run into trouble as a church when ego gets involved.

Don't they know that I ALWAYS lead this, or bring that or do that other thing???

When someone else steps up, often out of enthusiasm and a desire to help, we can have our pride hurt, or we can be possessive and angry, looking unkindly upon the actions of another just trying to help.

When John goes to Jesus to complain about others “unauthorized others” serving in the name of Jesus, he is also acting out of pride, and ego. If someone else starts doing what we are doing, do we become less important? Less special?

And that leads to stumbling blocks...

Jesus goes on to warn them about the stumbling blocks they place in front of others.

Jesus seems to be saying that we shouldn't worry so much about *who* is one of us but instead we should take care not to hurt those who are also here to help, even if they have taken on a task that you see as your own.

Maybe that's why I remember the Prison chaplain Joe so well, because, in that moment, when he would normally lead us sycophants from the seminary in prayer, he saw someone new, the imam, and saw a greater opportunity to expand the ministry, even setting aside his own self-importance to welcome a

new voice, a new energy into the room.

Jesus is concerned for the little ones, which may mean children or maybe the newer Christians, it is not clear. He may also refer to those who are vulnerable, those who have less power.

We shouldn't place stumbling blocks in their paths. Because, let's face it, isn't that what we often do when we are threatened by the actions or the mere presence of another? We don't stand idle but we often find ways to disparage others: other churches, or people who have inadvertently stepped on your toes in your own church. Those whose presence or actions challenge an inflated view of our own self-importance, like John, are often made to stumble by our own jealous actions.

In Greek the word that is used several times throughout this passage is *skandalon* from which we get the English word "scandal." A *skandalon* is an obstacle that people trip over, but it's not just something that we left out without thinking, like a shoe on the bedroom floor. A *skandalon* is something that we place in another's way intentionally.

But more commonly, a scandal, in the vernacular sense, is something revealed to trip someone up, embarrass them, to cause them hurt, make them lose power and a scandal or *skandalon*, makes it difficult to recover your standing or your footing.

But Jesus tells us to focus on what *we* do because when we focus on what's wrong with who we see as an outsider, we place stumbling blocks in their paths, we hurt the "little ones" and sadly, we often do it in his name.

It's hard to hear Jesus' words and not ask ourselves, "What stumbling blocks are we putting in front of other people? What ways do we hurt someone, hurt enough that they go away and don't come back?"

What scandals do we cause because we are threatened by another?"

See, it's not so easy to turn our attention away from someone else and focus on what we do to others...

Focusing inward rather than picking on others is not a natural behavior for any of us. Isn't it so much easier to point out the speck in another's eye than to see your own? We may not be able to "see" our own eye without aid of a mirror but we certainly can feel it. And that's where prayer comes in, prayer helps us to "feel" the things that doesn't belong...the jealousy, anger, or resentment.

I had lunch at a presbytery meeting a few years ago with a fellow minister who said "You know, there's one part of the traditional Presbyterian service that we never do; we never say a prayer of confession." He went on to explain that early in his ministry a congregant complained about how the church always made him feel bad about himself and that he didn't come to church to feel bad. That stuck with my friend so strongly that he never did another prayer of confession.

I understand that; I believe people should leave church feeling good and empowered and affirmed. I would also agree that John Calvin and Presbyterians as a rule can be a bit heavy-handed on sin and depravity.

Still, I disagreed with this colleague, I think confession is the very path we must travel to find authentic happiness. Being the best person you can be is a discipline, it is a daily practice and confession reminds us of our need for constant awareness of how we live in this world. We know the times when we have been selfish or uncaring. There are times we need to be washed clean, we need to be forgiven. This last week our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated Yom Kippur, the holiest in the Jewish calendar. It is the Day of Atonement, a day of prayer and fasting in which each person is supposed to

atone for their sins against God. But there is something that has to happen before that. Erev Yom Kippur, before the Day of Atonement is a time set aside for asking for forgiveness from each other. Before one approaches God to be reconciled, one must approach one's sister or brother. But so often we don't want to look at those things, those things that implicate ourselves.

Confession requires work. Forgiveness requires work. It is knowing that we need forgiveness and casting ourselves on the grace and mercy of God. It is how we ready ourselves to reach out to others in healing. To be that safe place where one who was once hurt can return without fear. That's why we confess, to be reminded of God's grace and to be graceful ourselves.

In this Season of Peace, I am constantly reminded of the prayer of St. Francis, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." But as we sang this at the service for Bob Nash, we used the old translation, "make me a channel of your peace." We want to be the pathway someone takes to God. We want to be a channel, not a stumbling block.