Sermon for 18th Sunday after Pentecost

September 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

This week’s Gospel reading picks up right where last week’s ended. Jesus picked up a child and held her, saying, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.”

Perhaps hoping to get back in Jesus’ good graces, John says, “Teacher! We saw someone casting out demons in your name, but they weren’t part of *our* group, so we stopped them.”

Whenever I read this, I imagine John feeling *certain* that Jesus will praise them, affirm what the disciples did in front of others. And that just makes what happens next feel even worse.

Jesus once again offers correction to his disciples, and he does so using language that is, quite frankly, shocking. But that correction offers us a bit more of the picture of what is involved in being a follower of Jesus. And…it asks a lot of us.

We should not assume that Jesus is literally advocating self-mutilation here. If he were, none of us would have limbs or eyes. But just because Jesus engages in hyperbole doesn’t mean he wasn’t being serious.

Jesus uses this harsh language to get our attention, to shock us into hearing what he’s saying, and deny us the chance to diminish his message. Which is a pretty important message: If you cause another person to stumble, you have done something that is utterly and completely at odds with being a disciple of Christ. You have, quite possibly, done something to make them feel as if they have been separated from the love of God.

No wonder Jesus uses such shocking language.

Here, I think it’s useful to ask 2 questions. The first is, “what does Jesus mean by ‘stumbling block’?” And the second is, “how do we cause others to stumble?”

When you put a stumbling block in front of someone, you prevent them from continuing on their path without any burden. You make things *harder* for them, which necessarily makes it less likely they’ll continue on that path. What the disciples did by stopping the person casting out demons was place a stumbling block in front of both the person who was doing it and anybody that person might help.

The 12 seem to have assumed that they had the right to oversee how others could behave. How others should live out their discipleship. That, by being in Jesus’ inner circle, they somehow had the *authority* to determine who was able to participate in the ministry of Jesus.

But Jesus tells them it’s not for them to decide. Just because that man had not become a part of Jesus’ inner circle did not mean he didn’t have faith. Just because he didn’t hang out with them and follow Jesus in the same way the 12 did, Jesus says, didn’t make his discipleship and faith any less valid.

And by stopping him, they may have made the man question whether he was doing the right thing, may have placed doubts in his mind about his faith. They may have created a sense of rivalry, a division among the followers of Jesus. And Jesus wants nothing to do with that kind of thinking.

What the 12 probably *didn’t* think about *at all* was the people that this man helped. If he had the gift of being able to cast out demons in Jesus’ name, he was able to offer wholeness and a path to abundant life for those who suffered.

So not only did the disciples place a stumbling block in the man’s path, they also put stumbling blocks in the paths of other people who wouldn’t receive healing, wouldn’t experience God’s grace.

To their surprise, Jesus doesn’t praise the 12 for stopping the man from casting out demons. Instead, he says they need to pay *more* attention to their *own* behavior.

Because it’s by **not** paying attention to how our actions affect others—or *not caring* how they affect others—that we place stumbling blocks in the paths of our neighbors. To borrow from the psalmist, when the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts are *not* pleasing and acceptable to God, we are stumbling blocks.

Like tripping over an uneven sidewalk, stumbling blocks cause us to fall out of rhythm. They keep us from growing in faithfulness by providing space for doubt to take root, creating the opportunity for distraction to lead us off our path.

I don’t think the 12 meant to place a stumbling block in the path of the man they encountered. But their narrow focus, their rigid understanding of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus, allowed them to do so.

Over and over, Jesus upends the way we understand what it means to have faith. He calls us into discipleship, a wholly new way of life. A way of life that is lived focusing outward, not inward; on heavenly things, not earthly things.

For the 12 and for us, being a disciple is a lifelong learning process. We’re meant to be constantly learning about what it means to be loved by God, learning how to share God’s love with others. Learning how to live in peace with our neighbor, instead of buying into the hostility and divisiveness the world seems so fond of these days.

What we’re reminded of today is that being a disciple means paying more attention to what *we do* than judging others for what they do.

Living a life with the kind of intent that Jesus speaks of is *hard*. There’s no way around it. Following the teachings of Christ means devoting our lives to learning how to sow peace and justice in a world that is not always interested in such ideals. It is work we will not always succeed in doing, and sometimes we won’t *want* to do it.

And that’s where grace comes in.

God asks a lot of us. But God offers so much more.

God’s grace is unending. God’s mercy and forgiveness are gifts freely given to us out of God’s immeasurable love.

And so there is always hope for us.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you call us to paths of discipleship, not knowing where those paths will lead us, but trusting that your Spirit guides us and equips us along the way. Send your Spirit among us that we may be signs of your love for all the world. Amen.