

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, September 26, 2021

“The Church Walls Can't Contain God”

Text: Mark 9:38-50

We have had some tough lessons these past few weeks about what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus. They are hard to preach on.

In our Gospel for today, the disciples are reminded that they aren't the only ones doing the work of Jesus in the world. That they don't have an exclusive lock on Jesus' ministry and mission in the world.

In fact, today in our world, much of the work of Jesus is done outside the church walls or denominations, by individuals in their daily lives and vocations. You are doing the work of Jesus in your homes by caring for loved ones, on the front lines in hospitals and nursing homes, in schools where teachers and administrators are trying to navigate Covid-19 through masking and testing protocols, or at work in businesses and non-profits that are providing goods and services for the world. Much of God's work is done behind the scenes and won't always get noticed or credit.

So as difficult as this text is, I found an illustration from the movie Toy Story 4, that came out in 2019, to help us understand. Bonnie, Andy's sister, received all of Andy's toys when he went off to college. She didn't play with the toys the way Andy did and there was grief by toys like Woody. Bonnie even gave Woody's badge to Jesse the cowgirl. Well, Bonnie was afraid to go to Kindergarten. Moved by her fear, Cowboy Woody jumps into action and sneaks into her backpack. The classroom scene is a busy scramble with Woody in the background, helping an emotional Bonnie find her place in school, fetching her crayons, and other items from the trash. Bonnie even made a new favorite toy, Forky, out of a spork Woody found in the trash. Servants don't always have to be seen or formally recognized. Great work can be done in the background.

Following Jesus is not the easy road. Jesus reminds the disciples multiple times that following him will go through the cross, and it will involve suffering and doing things without earthly recognition.

Last week we heard that in order to be great, you must be last of all and servant of all.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus has a special concern for a group of people called "little ones"... Which includes children, the most vulnerable in society, the ones with the least power, those who are suffering in any way, and people new to the faith or curious about Jesus.

The problem for the disciples is that they saw someone they didn't know casting out demons in Jesus' name. The disciple John told Jesus, we tried to stop him, and he wouldn't follow us.

They were expecting Jesus to do something about it... to go and stop it. But instead, they got a lecture from Jesus to let the stranger, who Jesus considered a little one, be... that battling evil in the world is an all hands on deck thing.

Then Jesus shares all these sayings with his disciples that may be hard to understand at first and hard to hear. I will do my best to parse them out.

Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." If someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name, then they are on our team. They will see the power in Jesus' name and can't help but to believe. I lean on the verse in Romans 8:1 when Paul says, for now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Even though we don't always agree theologically or biblically with other Christians, they can still be doing Jesus' work behind the scenes. Who am I to judge?

The next saying of Jesus is in 9:41 is, "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward". If someone offers you a cup of water to help sustain you and your ministry, they are doing the work of Jesus. They too will receive the reward of the kingdom. For us today, when you see someone in need and help them out, this is the work of Jesus in the world. Loving the neighbor as yourself is the work of Jesus in the world.

Then Jesus warns the disciples against putting "a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me" (9:42a). A

stumbling block isn't a term we throw around often, except maybe in church. In the original Greek of the New Testament it is the word for stumbling block is "scandalon". Or scandal. It was a way of trapping animals. It conveys the sense of tripping up someone for a downfall. The church, and pastors, and Christians have put up their share of stumbling blocks throughout history... that drive people away. We need to repent of our wrongs and seek forgiveness.

Jesus does not want his followers to trip people up by being too exclusive or through our actions that don't represent Jesus' kingdom values. You can't say one thing on Sunday and disregard it the rest of the week.

To cause a little one to fall away, to turn from Jesus, brings forth one of the harshest sayings of Jesus in the gospels. If there is anything that brings about the fall of little ones, "it would be better for you if a great millstone was hung about your neck and you were thrown into the sea" (9:42b).

A millstone is huge. It took an animal to turn it. A person couldn't even lift it. It would cause you to sink immediately to the depths of the sea and drown. That is harsh.

Jesus goes further using shock to describe ways we can put stumbling blocks in front of people. What we do with our hands, our feet, and our eyes matter. Mr. Weatherell a principle at a Christian School our kids went to in Oregon always said, "Our Hands are for helping, not for hurting." Our feet can take us to some good places, but bad places too. What we look at with our eyes or how we look at people can hurt ourselves and those around us.

Jesus says, if your hands or feet cause you to sin, cut them off. If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to go through life maimed than to go to hell. If we took Jesus literally, we should all be limbless and blind.

But there is actually hope in this text. First of all, God's boundaries of who is "in" are way more generous than ours. Second, Jesus says in the end that you are salt. Salt was one of the most precious commodities in the first century. Jesus says, you are precious. Roman soldiers were paid wages in salt. Salt was used for

cleansing, preservation, and flavor. But you didn't want to over salt things. You know the saying, Don't throw salt on an open wound. Too much salt ruins the whole batch. The right amount of salt can bring out the best in our communities. Jesus ends with, "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."