

Sunday, September 29, 2024
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21B)

Mark 9.38-50

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/839302385027911>

(Sermon begins at about 22:35)

“Not Us and Them, Only Us”

Today’s Gospel is a continuation of last week’s reading, in which the disciples, on a journey to Capernaum, argue among themselves about who is the greatest. As you may recall, Jesus attempted to settle the argument by telling them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9.35). One of Jesus’ quintessential statements about the nature of his ministry, about what it means to be his followers. That his purpose—their purpose, our purpose—is not about seeking to be served, but rather to serve. It is not about seeking glory and exaltation, but rather about seeking to humble ourselves in service so that others may be glorified and exalted.

To further illustrate his chastising of the disciples, to put an exclamation point on his statement, Jesus then “took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’” (Mk 9.36-37). One of the most beloved of images in the Gospels—we even have a window depicting this scene in our narthex. An image that is meant to send the message that welcoming those who are powerless, those who are most in need of God’s love and grace, of God’s care, is actually the welcoming of God himself. That those who follow Jesus are to care for that which, those who, are of greatest concern to God: the poor and the marginalized, the widowed and orphaned, the sick and infirmed. That true service is to those who lack social standing, such as the child Jesus is holding in his arms.

You’d think the disciples would get the point. But no! No sooner does Jesus deliver this lesson about their primary purpose being humble service than John—one of the inner circle of disciples, no less—pops off with “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Where to even begin . . . You can just see Jesus rolling his eyes and shaking his head in disbelief. The sheer arrogance in John’s statement. The self-righteousness. The air of superiority. All the things that Jesus had just been chastising the disciples about. To not seek superiority, but rather humility. To not seek honor, but rather service. To not seek to cast down, but rather to lift up. With the zinger being John’s statement that they tried to stop the one casting out demons in Jesus’ name because “he was not following us.” Following US? Excuse me, but who is the leader of this movement? And who are the followers? John’s statement is the height of hubris. Equating following Jesus with following us. As if the disciples were on equal footing, were equal partners with Jesus in this venture. With the “not following us” creating, at least in the disciples’ minds, an “us vs. them” mentality. If they are not with us, they must be against us. Sadly, something we see all too often even today: the presumption on the part of some that

because they profess to follow Jesus, whatever they want is undoubtedly what Jesus also wants, what God wants.

Not to excuse John's attitude of arrogance and self-professed superiority, but as an aside, there may be a very human reaction at play here. One that is blinding him and the disciples to the lesson Jesus is trying to teach about service and humility. One that actually might have something to do not with humility but with humiliation. Earlier in the ninth chapter of Mark's Gospel, a man brings his son to the disciples for healing. The son is possessed by a spirit, which results in seizures. The disciples are unable to cast out the demon and heal the boy. Jesus arrives on the scene and in exasperation says, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you?" (Mk 9.19) and then heals the boy. Perhaps, coming upon the man not of their group who was casting out demons added insult to this previous perceived injury. Out of jealousy that he could do what they could not. Perhaps they are overcompensating by professing their zealous devotion to Jesus and his ministry. An attempt to demonstrate to Jesus their absolute devotion, despite previous failures.

While the disciples are bent out of shape about others not of their group casting out demons in Jesus' name, Jesus does not have a problem with it. As he tells them, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." The disciples are viewing this as a zero-sum game, as an either/or situation. If you are not with us, you are against us. Jesus, on the other hand, is viewing it as a both/and situation. That it is not about who is in and who is out; about who is "officially" one of us and who is not. When it comes to doing God's work, to caring for those of greatest concern to God, it is the end result that counts. Not who gets "the credit." Because it's not about us. It's about those we are ministering to. And we minister to others not on our own name, but in Jesus' name.

Jesus is obviously a little concerned about the disciples' lack of understanding. They are supposed to be learning what it means to truly be his followers, to be examples of faithfully living the Gospel. But in this moment, they are not doing a very good job of living up to those expectations. So, a little more teaching is needed about the significance of their role as those who follow him. He then goes into a pretty harsh discussion about being an impediment to others in their own faith journeys. He starts by saying, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me (dot, dot, dot)." Remember, he is still holding the child in his arms. He uses the child as an example for those who will look to the disciples for guidance in the faith. In typical Jesus-fashion, he uses hyperbole to get his point across. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off . . . if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off . . . if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out." Of course, he is not advocating that someone physically maim themselves if they falter, if they should do something to cause others to question their worthiness or their ability to live the Gospel faithfully. But he is using this to convey the need for those who follow him to remove that which creates a barrier to truly living the Gospel. Specifically, to examine our own lives, our own thoughts and perceptions, our own actions, to determine if they are indeed consistent with Gospel living. And if we find ourselves coming up short, to take corrective actions. To find ways to change or eliminate the offending thoughts, perceptions, or actions. For example, if you think you are better than others who are also doing

ministry, just because they are from a different group, or because they might be more successful than you are, you just need to get over yourself. We're looking at you, John.

Of course, any of us who have attempted to change ingrained patterns and behaviors know such change is not easy. And yet, when it comes to our lives of faith, such self-discipline is crucial. It cannot be avoided. To this point, Jesus says, "For everyone will be salted with fire." To our ears, a cryptic image. Perhaps even ominous. However, as one commentator notes regarding this particular verse: "Salt was a preservative in the ancient world, and it was also sometimes added to sacrifices in order to help purify them. The poetic idea here, then, is that by the grace of God, a disciple's trials—including the trials of self-discipline—will ultimately have a seasoning, preservative, refining effect."¹ In other words, Jesus is calling the disciples, and us, to engage in the critical work of examining our lives to determine where we might fall short of living as Jesus calls us to. And having engaged in prayerful self-examination, to then have the self-discipline (with God's help, of course) to seek to change those thoughts, perceptions, or actions which may be a stumbling block in our own lives of faith. In so doing, our own lives of faith are seasoned, preserved, and refined.

As Jesus implies, this process of self-examination and self-discipline is not solely for our personal benefit. It is also for a broader purpose: for God's purposes. For the benefit of our own ministries and for the benefit of those we engage and serve in our ministries. As followers of Christ, Jesus calls us "to serve as 'salt' for creation (seasoning, preserving, refining), as well as to 'have salt in yourselves' (to be seasoned, supported, refined)—all for the sake of being 'at peace with one another.'"²

Serving as examples of faithful living, and the work of self-examination and self-discipline that serve to season, preserve, and refine our lives of faith, have benefits that extend beyond our time in church, our ministries, and our spiritual lives. The example of genuine Gospel living applies to every area of our lives, individually and communally. The "us and them" mentality exhibited by the disciples at the beginning of today's Gospel reading is not limited to faith, to religion, and to the Church. Such attitudes and perceptions are merely a reflection of the broader culture and society in which the Church finds itself. In which the Church and its members have the opportunity to make a difference. The difference Jesus seeks to instill in his disciples.

So much of what we see and how we experience the world around us is based on an "us vs. them" mentality. Divisions based on race or ethnicity, religion, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation, politics, socioeconomics, just to name the major ones. I would venture to say that many, if not most, of us have experienced some sense of being treated as "other" because of these or similar culturally or societally imposed categories. And yet, as Jesus seeks to teach his disciples, engaging in such "us and them" attitudes and behavior is contrary to God's vision for us: that we all have a common and shared identity as beloved children of God. Which means there is no us and them, but only us. As followers of Jesus, he calls us to not perpetuate or erect such dichotomies, such stumbling blocks, but to work to dismantle them wherever we encounter them. Beginning with ourselves. With the goal that we may "have salt in [ourselves], and be at peace with one another."

¹ “Be at Peace: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Nineteenth Week after Pentecost,” SALT, September 24, 2024. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/9/25/be-at-peace-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-nineteenth-week-after-pentecost>.

² Ibid.