September 27, 2015
Mark 9:38-50
*On the Mend: Healing What Ails Us – Healing Divisions*

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Mark 9:38-50 New Revised Standard Version

*John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “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. 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 any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

 I think zombies are cool, and I cannot wait for The Walking Dead’s next season to start, but Jesus is grossing me out. Jesus is exaggerating for the sake of emphasis, he wants his followers to commit themselves completely and totally. Jesus’ graphic images makes me think about what I need to cut out of my life that keeps me from being complete, the whole person God made and means for me to be?[[1]](#footnote-2) What is causing me to stumble? What can I do to grow closer to God?

 The disciples are trying, but they just don’t get it. Someone was trying to do something good but they stopped them because they weren’t part of their group.

I served as a pastor in England from 2001-2002. We lived in a new town, which meant that it was created after World War II. We lived about thirty minutes east of London by train and some of the older folks in the church had fled to that part of England as children during the blitz in London. The town where we lived had three different Methodist churches, one had 40 people, one had 30 people and one had 60 people. It seemed silly to me that we had three small churches, why couldn’t we combine them and have one church? But every time I mentioned something about it, I was quickly put in my place. We Christians become very territorial very quickly, don’t we?

It makes me think of self-differentiation. It is a normal part of human development to realize that I am different than you. Do you remember those games you used to play as children? If you like chocolate get on this side of the room. If you are wearing a pink shirt get on this side of the room. It you are a Methodist get over here.

I was very secluded in my faith growing up. Yes, I went to the Baptist church with my dad every other weekend, and with my mom to the Methodist church the other weekends, but I remember talking with a friend in high school who was a Catholic and I thought to myself, well, they weren’t even a Christian. Catholics are Christians, by the way.

 Have you ever noticed how many different kinds of churches there are? There is one intersection in Dallas where there are four different churches at four different corners of the street. One of the things that Jimmy Carter has said that is wonderful is, “I am convinced that Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and others can embrace each other in a common effort to alleviate human suffering and to espouse peace."

 Jesus says “whoever is not against us is for us.” No judgment. We are all in this together. And we know that in our heads, but we will draw up the dividing lines in our hearts faster than you can say battle lines. Faith is not about competition, faith is about conversation. It is about support and community. I have always loved being at church because I experience Christian life with other people.

 Has anyone attended a high school or college reunion? I went to my 10th high school reunion and someone kept talking to me. I could not remember who she was, but she remembered me and I seriously had no idea. And then I was talking to someone I did remember and she was all impressed because I was talking to the head cheerleader. I could not even remember her name.

 It is so hard not to compare yourself to anyone but yourself. There is no one else like you. May God help us to let go of our judgment, of our competition, and our expectation. The goal of faith is not winning, it is not about being better, it is not about comparing yourself to someone else. If we all believed the same way, how boring would that be? Faith is individual.

 It is not about seeing someone doing something different than you. It is about seeing God in others. It is about seeing God in the acts of others.

 Greenland Hills has a relationships with Proyecto Abrigo in Juarez and last January I went with 17 others to build a home for Hector, Alejandra, Ian & Abraham. I remember we were making the concrete. We had sand in a circle and rocks and the concrete mix and we put water in the middle and did a dance as we mixed it all up. And we were in the midst of this concrete making party when we noticed a big truck coming down the road. It was a concrete truck! And we watched as the truck stopped at a house, and concrete poured out of it! It was hard not to feel really mean things about that other house. But how wonderful that there are different ways to create concrete!

 We Christians have a lot of different ways of understanding a variety of topics, the ordination of women, the proper role of religion in politics, climate change, homosexuality and same-sex unions, Biblical translation, gender pronouns for God, how best to help the poorest of the poor, how best to support the sanctity of marriage, hell, heaven, baptism, which brand of coffee to serve, whether we say trespasses or debts/debtors in the Lord’s Prayer, whether to use wafers, pita, home- baked organic wheat, gluten-free or bagels at the communion table…[[2]](#footnote-3)

 It should come as no surprise to most of us that the world outside the church looking in sees it filled with conflict and disagreement. But the church is a community of humans and is imperfect. And our faith is imperfect too.[[3]](#footnote-4)

This week the Pope has been all over the news. He was so cute riding in his little Italian car surrounded by huge SUV's. Then he rode in his Pope Mobile. Now we remember from earlier that I thought Catholics were not Christians. Listening to his speeches there were so many things I agreed with that he said. This man, from such a different background, saw our job here in much the same way I do. He spoke of helping the poor, the sick, the widow, the homeless, the lonely, the elderly.

John Wesley, the first Methodist, was speaking to those who opposed him in the church, Wesley said, "Give me your hand. I do not mean, ‘Be of my opinion.’ You need not: I do not expect it or desire it. Neither do I mean I will be of your opinion. I cannot. Keep your opinion; I mine; and that as steadily as ever. You need not endeavor to come over to me or bring me to you. Only give me your hand. We must act as each is fully persuaded in their own mind. Hold fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. Let all these smaller points stand aside. If your heart is as my heart, if you love God and all humankind, I ask no more. Simply, give me your hand."[[4]](#footnote-5)

Giving our hand to another is the first step toward social holiness, toward living out the message of the ultimate lesson of the Gospels. Is there a way that we can advocate for societal change through compassionate service together with those who have different theological or religious differences than us? Can we listen to the Pope's words without asking him to believe as we do? The Pope does not approve of same sex marriage so can we listen to the other things he says without turning him off? Jesus asks us to do just that.

John Wesley wants us to find what is most basic to our faith and agree to that if to nothing else. Jesus wants us to remember that whoever is not against us is for us. Jesus wants us to have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with one another. Can we use conditional phrases like “based on my understanding of Scripture” or “I might be wrong about this” or “My views on this are evolving.” When we read about the pilgrims to Mecca who were trampled in an awful stampede, can we feel empathy for their loved ones? Jesus wants us to do just that.

Can we listen to what others have to say, acknowledge that we have heard it, and show that we respect the person speaking and that we love them as a child of God. In the Message translation which is more of a paraphrase, Jesus says this man that the disciples are all worked up about, this man is an ally not an enemy.

There is a story of General Robert E. Lee speaking in the highest terms of another officer, when one of the men interrupted him: “General, do you know that man is one of your biggest enemies, and misses no opportunity to ridicule you?” “Yes,” Lee said, “But I was asked to give my opinion of him, not his opinion of me.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

We are called to act with the same integrity, because how we act reflects upon Christ. Christ is on our side helping us to live our faith. Bishop Woodie White said, “No matter how bad the bad news gets—the final word is always the good news of Jesus Christ.” We are called to remember that and seek to glorify God with our lives.[[6]](#footnote-7)

1. From Two Bubbas and a Bible at [www.lectionarylab.com](http://www.lectionarylab.com) found in The Abingdon Creative Preaching Annual 2015 compiled by Jenee Woodard. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://sojo.net/articles/deliver-us-smugness> written by Cathleen Falsani [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://sojo.net/articles/deliver-us-smugness> written by Cathleen Falsani [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Story found here <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3099/sermon-options-september-27-2015> written by Billy D. Strayhorn [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The last paragraph comes from <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3099/sermon-options-september-27-2015> written by Billy D. Strayhorn [↑](#footnote-ref-7)