

Mark 9:38-50

CHANNELS OF GRACE

I had a seminary professor, who was very upstanding and one of the most brilliant persons I have ever known. One day in the fall of 1972, a young man, who had been part of the drug culture in the 60s and 70s, approached my professor while he was sitting in his car waiting for the stoplight to change. This young man had met Jesus and was now part of an evangelistic crusade group called “Christ is the Answer.” All of them had been encountered by the risen Lord and had been transformed on the inside. However, they still kept their outward appearance the same - with long greasy hair, torn and worn blue jeans, and tie-dyed shirts and blouses - in order that they could witness to those who were still part of the drug scene. Anyway, this young man unknowingly approached our distinguished professor of Greek New Testament, stuck his head through the open driver’s side window, and said to him, “Mister, Jesus loves you and so do I.” Dr. Currie took one look and, with his quick wit, replied to him, “Son, half of that is good news!”

I’m sure that Dr. Currie was just having some fun. I believe that Dr. Currie, upon further reflection, would recognize that, while this man dressed and lived his faith differently from Dr. Currie’s own preferred style of Christian witness, nevertheless, he was a brother in Christ, a fellow member of the family of faith.

The scripture passage for today has something to say about welcoming others who are different from us, so let’s turn our attention to the narrative found within Mark’s Gospel. Here’s the situation: the twelve disciples reported to Jesus that they saw someone casting out demons in his name, and they tried to stop him because “he was not following us.” To their surprise, Jesus corrected them and told them “Whoever is not against us is *for* us.” Then, to emphasize his point, Jesus said that whoever does a deed of power in his name, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, that person is united with you even though they may look or do things differently.

Jesus is reminding his disciples of just how inclusive the kingdom of God really is. The disciples have had hints of that already as they have watched Jesus reach out to and befriend tax collectors, lepers, small children, women, Gentiles, Samaritans, and a number of outcasts. Jesus intends for his Church to be wide open to receive any and all who want to follow Jesus.

And that really is the point, isn’t it? The disciples complained because the man casting out demons in Jesus’ name was not following *us*. But, he was following Jesus and acting in Jesus’ name and with Jesus’ power to do good for another. All too often, we try to impose limits and decide who’s in and who’s out based on whether or not they “follow us” or measure up to our standards. However, the main criterion is this: are they following Jesus and acting in his name? If so, welcome them into the family.

The church’s history is littered with religious barriers put in place by well-meaning but misguided disciples of Jesus, who have sought to keep the church the way they want it to be, rather than the way Jesus envisions and calls his church to be. In our own lives, many of us have known times when the church was segregated, when women and divorced members were unable to hold office, when people of different nationalities were not welcomed, or people with a different sexual orientation were discouraged from

being a part of the fellowship. Let us give thanks to God that those days are on the way out. It is the Holy Spirit, who not only leads us deeper into the truth but also changes us so that we can be channels of God's grace and welcome others in the name of Jesus!

Jesus chides his disciples whenever they/we judge who belongs and who doesn't belong in the church. Jesus exhorts his disciples to see that God has a much bigger heart that includes people who don't look and act like us but who do act like Jesus! And, if we are planning to follow Jesus, we had better be accepting of all others, who are also on the road with Jesus. Rather than stop people from participating in Christ's church and ministry, we are told to stop judging others and start welcoming them as those who are also channels of God's grace offered to many others.

For the remainder of this passage Jesus doesn't mince any words to his disciples, then or now: "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." Then Jesus speaks about cutting off our hand, our foot, or our eye if they cause us to stumble. Obviously, Jesus doesn't mean what he says. After all, our faith does not advocate self-mutilation. This is one of those points of Scripture that demonstrate the Bible is to be taken *seriously*, but not *literally*.

Jesus tells all of his disciples that causing others to suffer because of our bad examples are reasons for severe punishment. The demands of discipleship are tremendous, and Jesus' figurative language about cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes is meant to shake his disciples out of their self-centered complacency.

Jesus' disciples are called to change their behavior so as to welcome others and not be so quick to judge others – after all, that's God's business and not ours (thank God!). We are to refrain from becoming useless disciples who are like salt that has lost its saltiness. Whenever we are tolerant of those outside our faith tradition and appreciative of their good works, and whenever we are tolerant of those inside the faith by holding our own self-righteousness in check, we are like salt that enriches the flavors that are already present. Whenever we act in this manner, which is the way of Christ, we will indeed be at peace with one another."

I want to close by sharing a true story that Will Willmon once told. He writes: During my first summers in college, I worked in the factory of a man who taught Sunday School in our church. He had a library of Bible study books. I thought it a privilege to work in the factory of such a fine, Bible-believing businessman. Each workday in that factory opened with a devotional. All the workers gathered and he, the president of the company, taught us the Bible.

But, after the Bible study, when the whistle blew, well, he put that Bible stuff aside and it was all business. Yelling at people, pushing people on the assembly line, humiliating one worker in front of another, little advancement except for people with skin the color of his. One day, in a fit of rage, he fired a man who had worked in his factory for forty years. The poor man was driven off the assembly line, reduced to tears, and cast out without prospects or pension. This was the work of this Bible-believing Christian.

There was another man in the factory. I knew him, but not well. He was a rough talking, loud-cursing, chain-smoking, profane sort of man who would never darken the door of a church. That terrible day he was the only person in the plant, who laid down his tools, shook his head in contempt at the boss, and walked off the job in courageous

protest. Later, I learned that this man dug down into his own meager life savings to provide food and housing to support his unfortunate fellow worker.

Unlike the boss, this profane man didn't know Jesus, didn't read the Bible, and didn't go to church. Now think hard, class. Which man do you think exemplified for me, in my nineteen years of life, nearness to Jesus? Forget the proper credentials, forget the right words, the membership card! If he isn't against us, he's for us! (*Pulpit Resource*, September 25, 1994, p. 54)

Jesus calls us to be disciples, who are inclusive, non-judging, and ever welcoming of others. We are reminded here and elsewhere to be channels of God's grace. On our better days, that's probably what we want as well. But then there are those days when we fall short and we try to determine who's in and who's out. We stumble and fall and, by our poor witness, we cause others to stumble as well. Sometimes, we take our privileged discipleship for granted and we ignore the tremendous responsibilities. At times, we have lost our flavor as Christians, and we are not at peace with one another.

What then? Should we fear these dire warnings of Jesus in our text for today? We certainly ought to take them to heart! After all, Jesus has set high standards for us as his disciples. He desires, calls forth, and expects our very best at all times. And yet, he knows us at our worst, and, he knows that we are powerless to change our sinful ways.

Therefore, "he descended into hell" on our behalf. Instead of exacting his own judgment that we cut off a hand or foot or tear out an eye, Jesus was taken to Gehenna, the garbage dump south of Jerusalem (which is translated "hell"), where he was nailed to the cross, and his own hands and feet and side were pierced in cruel mockery. There, he confronted our sinfulness and said, "You are forgiven." His sacrifice transformed Gehenna from a horrid place of our judgment into the place of our salvation.

Out of profound gratitude, as Jesus' disciples, let us thank him best by welcoming others, by refraining to judge others or causing them to stumble, by being at peace with one another, and by always striving to be channels of God's grace – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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