

Mark 9:38-50

This morning Jesus turns the spotlight on the disciples themselves. The Gospel reading begins with the disciples complaining to Jesus about a rival exorcist whom they tried to stop. Jesus tells them to back off, because "whoever is not against us, is for us". We get the message loud and clear that the disciples' finger pointing won't get very far with Jesus. While they are quick to judge an outsider who is acting in Jesus' name, Jesus himself wants the disciples to pay close attention instead to THEIR OWN behavior...things they can control.

He turns the tables on them, warning them that they are the problem and the ones in danger of doing harm. The problem is not the folks outside the group. Don't worry about them...worry about yourself...look in the mirror! How are you getting in the way of the gospel? How are YOU a stumbling block?"

You ever know some folks are into the blame game. Things are never really their fault but rather someone else's even to the point of absurdity. But what I find interesting is that if you listen to the news or any politician long enough, you'll see that this behavior permeates our society. See by focusing on the other... or by alienating or blaming someone or something else we never have to look in the mirror at ourselves! Seeing our own perceptions, our own prejudices, our own hand in the brokenness in the world all around us.

I learned this lesson myself the hard way... it was very effective in teaching me how to take responsibility and accountability for myself.

When I was young, in my 20s, I was a very successful store manager in a large retail chain in the 80s BEST Products. My stores always did well. I was so proud of all my accomplishments! Then one day upon returning from vacation the district manager was there to greet me.

After the normal pleasantries he asked if we could meet me in private. You ever have that sinking feeling deep in your gut and you start to play out what could possibly be wrong... but I had nothing??? So I just sat and listened...I was being told that I was being written up for something that had happened in the store while I was away on vacation.

The store was broken out of...someone hid in the warehouse and after closing some computers were stolen and the perpetrator went out the emergency exit.

I asked if he knew I was on vacation last week. He informed me that proper closing protocols were not followed...Again I said but I was not here...how could I be held accountable...he informed me it was my store and that I was the one responsible... if I didn't train my employees properly then I shouldn't have gone on vacation. At first I was angry and incredulous at this affront on my ego...I was clearly being victimized.

Know anyone like that...when things go great, they take credit, but when things go wrong they blame something or someone else? UMMMM...Then I repented... I changed my own Point of View...I respected my district manager and he had always treated me fairly... I finally came to understand that he was trying to teach me something very valuable here.

The problem was my mindset...he wanted me to think and act as if it was MY personal store and that I was accountable for it in every way. To this day that experience stands out as a turning point in the way I began to think about things.

Taking responsibility and accountability for oneself is hard. Many of us don't really want to look into the mirror...it's easier to focus on the faults in others...Jesus says don't point out the splinter in someone's eye without first seeing the log in your own.

Eleanor Roosevelt said Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people. Where is Jesus trying to focus us here?! PAUSE

We can imagine that the first audiences who received the gospel of Mark would have recognized themselves in the disciples' sense of competition over what group can use Jesus' name, who is right, who has authority...who's on the inside track with God?! A lot of folks think I have a special red phone with a direct connection to God...I'm going to let you in on a little secret...you have the same number...but I do have God on speed dial.

Early Christian communities struggled in the midst of persecution and conflict over Jewish and Gentile relations, and all the growing pains of an infant church seeking its identity. Christian groups argued with one another (imagine that), contested each other's claims, and even sought to discredit one another. Thank God we have evolved and stuff like that doesn't happen today! (LOL)

Indeed, great damage is done when Christians are more focused on infighting and self-righteous proclamations about others. Jesus instead focuses us back to our own behaviors, the ways WE speak and LIVE OUT the good news, and Jesus asks us to look inside ourselves for the ways WE may be placing obstacles in the way of others.

Jesus could not be clearer: He is talking about the danger that his own followers can do, and He uses the dire image of drowning to get His point across. Better to drown with a millstone around one's neck than to do harm to "these little ones." They were in Capernaum (reference Bulletin Pic). There's the millstone and there is the sea...and these are Jesus own disciples...gulp!

It's interesting that Jesus lays bare the minefield of church...and the real dangers within Christian communities particularly between more mature disciples and "the little ones."

See the followers who are closest to Jesus carry a huge responsibility as a result of their intimacy with Christ. Others look to us, follow our examples, are susceptible to our practices, and are especially vulnerable to our criticisms. Carelessness in discipleship can do irreparable damage to those who are most vulnerable...and that goes especially for us clergy!

And Jesus continues... because you know - drowning isn't bad enough. Look at the things we hold most dear...our own body parts! Our convictions... our values... our own points of view as reality! Each point to stumbling blocks that are part of us. Things we hold dear. Things we think we need. Through these images, Jesus makes clear that stumbling blocks are not other people or things outside of us. They are part of who we are.

And Jesus uses this over-the-top, **BOLDED AND ALL CAPS**, idea to get His disciples' attention. We are likely to think there's nothing worse than losing a hand, a foot, or an eye. But Jesus says there is - the consequences of causing another to stumble in their relationship with God. This week's gospel lesson invites us as a church to examine the stumbling blocks we place right here, often unknowingly, often in faithful enthusiasm, in full view of the most vulnerable among us.

Throughout Christian history there's been a drive, among Jesus' followers, to be the best and therefore the closest to God in every possible way. We also want to be recognized and acknowledged by God and other people as the best.

And this drive to be the best and faithful followers of Jesus is still with us today! Christians always want to honor God; but somehow in that desire, we want to be honored too! Instead of just trying to bring honor to God we think that we deserve to be honored ourselves.

This story about Jesus' own friends reveals a dimension to Jesus' work in the world that is tough to accept... especially if you think your church and your ways are the only right way to heaven.

The Twelve think they've unearthed a scandal: someone outside their elite circle has been caught in the act. Doing what? Sinning? No. He was acting in Jesus' name (in this case, casting out demons). Terrible! We are the Twelve! The chosen ones! That's our job. That's our privilege!

And how ironic that is! Earlier in Mark chapter nine, none of the "Twelve" could exorcise an unclean spirit from a boy. And now here they want to forbid someone who is doing the same thing, but here's the rub, this person was actually successful.

So Jesus says cut out all your elitist BS. Stop resting on your privileged statuses. You are not the **ONLY** ones who can act in God's name!

We say, In the name of Jesus - That isn't simply a formula or magical incantation to stick on the end of a prayer, it is meant to express the reality of a life lived in relationship with God through the way of Jesus.

This man wasn't one of the chosen was he...yet he had a God-given ministry. He was doing the work of the kingdom. Who are you... and what on earth are you doing opposing him, says Jesus?

Some things never change... until very recently we have prevented women from exercising their calling as priests in our churches...and in many communities they are still excluded from living out that calling today.

Today our church and many communities are focused on the rights of our gay brothers and sisters...and the rights they have in answering their own calling to live out God's will for their lives. As if we have authority over who's in and who's out...over who's worthy to do God's work in Her world!

Another ongoing problem is this false distinction we have in our churches with labels! Like 'clergy' and 'laity'. Historically we have imposed meanings and distinctions that don't exist in the New Testament.

The Greek word for 'clergy', khlro, was not an elite set-aside group of priests. It had two meanings: one with drawing lots and the other means group.

There is nothing that suggests that there was a special group of ordained people to whom exclusive functions were designated. That was the Jewish idea of the priesthood and that fell with the Temple in 60AD...and the Jewish people have not even followed that model since... it was replaced with a Rabbinical (student-teacher) model still in use today.

Similarly, the word that became 'laity', lao, simply means the people...everybody.

If people were set aside in the New Testament church, it was to lead. They may be called bishops or presbyters (which are interchangeable words)...they were the elders of the communities and were leading them already. Or they maybe set aside others to serve (deacons)... but all have different gifts.

So who here then is accountable and responsible for our church...and who's calling us to live into Christian ministry? The short answer is that we are ALL responsible and accountable for living out God's calling in the world... and we each collectively have different roles to play as part of the body of Christ.

For us – myself and Deacon Naomi, think of us as facilitators and teachers (by word but more importantly by example) of Jesus’ way. We are to point to God, never to get in the way or become a stumbling block to those seeking a greater relationship with God. But you all aren’t off the hook either...you also have an active role to play.

So if you are not engaged in the work and ministry of Jesus I hereby and officially invite you to do so...for where your gifts and talents meet the world’s needs there I promise you - you will find God!

And those of us already engaged in ministry THANK YOU...but you also need to be wary...The labels of ‘clergy’ and ‘laity’ are not the only issues that arise in a church...other distinctions can also cause harm in congregations.

One person or group says, ‘That’s my job’, and in doing so may prevent others from serving. It can happen over music, flower arranging, Sunday School, money, food and property, you name it - any part of church life.

And again, the issue is often one of personal identity, worth and value...ego. When we take our sense of self-esteem from the jobs we do, then we make a grave mistake because true self-worth comes from knowing how much we are loved by God...not by what job we do for God...all of our ministries should always point to God.

So each one of us needs to ask ourselves, am I causing others to stumble? Am I preventing other people from acting in the name of Jesus? Jesus is telling His disciples then and now to be mindful of the dangers inherent with group dynamics...especially when it comes to labeling... when it comes to who we think is worthy and who’s not.

I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger.
I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.

I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your own health.

I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely and you left me alone to go and pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God.
But I am still so very hungry... and lonely... and cold.

You see my friends I am going to let you in on a little secret...I am going to leave you some "good" news today...some would even call it GREAT news!

As Paul said THERE IS NOTHING...NOT ONE THING that you... or this world can ever do to separate you from the Love of God in Jesus Christ.

You are ALL worthy...you are ALL invited into ministry...You are ALL invited by God to participate in the ongoing creation of the world...You are all invited to show others the kingdom of God...

For you are ALL Children of God...and God is with you always...right here...and right now...

Now GO and share this great news with others who so desperately need God to physically show up in their lives today. Now going to church won't necessarily change the world...But BEING the church... always will!

your faithful servant,
carmen