

September, 27, 2015
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Are you For or Against?

Oh, those poor disciples in Mark's gospel. Bless their hearts. They never seem to know what's going on. They don't understand Jesus. What he says is confusing and even shocking. They are doing their best just to try to keep up with him. They are stumbling along behind Jesus as he hurries from one startling event to the next. From one miracle to the next. From one exorcism to the next. From one show-down with the Pharisees to the next. Now Jesus is telling them that he will go to Jerusalem. And he will suffer and die and on the third day rise again. Those poor disciples, bless their hearts, they are just trying to keep up. All the disciples really know for sure in Mark's gospel, is that Jesus is up against something big and powerful. Again and again, they come face to face with the dark forces of evil that possess the world. They encounter people in the grips of a force beyond their control that sickens them. Or cripples them. Or torments them. These evil forces steal their dignity and their humanity. In this gospel the darkness has a hold of everything. The world is possessed by disease and greed and violence.

People are possessed by grief and suspicion and hatred. Does it sound familiar? Does it sound like a world that you might know?

In Mark's gospel, God's creation is possessed by dark and evil forces. And it is not presented as a cultural problem. It is not presented as an issue to be fixed by government agencies or non-profit programs. In Mark's gospel this is a spiritual problem for all of humanity. And it will take a spiritual fix. It will take Jesus, the Son of God, going up against the darkness. Standing against the evil and casting it out for good. And right away, in the very first chapter in Mark, Jesus takes his stand. Right away, Jesus lets the darkness know why he is there. Right away, at the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus performs an exorcism. And Jesus declares to the darkness and all the demons in it that their days are numbered; that this world is no longer theirs. And of course, they do not like that. They do not like Jesus standing against them. They do not like him taking what was theirs. So we know from the beginning of Mark that this is a showdown and it will be a fight to the finish.

Jesus understands this. He understands what is at stake. He understands what will happen if he takes this stand. He understands that to give the

world life again, it will cost him his life. He understands that he must die and rise again for all of us to rise again. Jesus understands that. But his disciples, well, they aren't quite there yet.

From the very beginning of Mark's gospel that has also been true. That the disciples don't get what's going on. They don't understand Jesus' mission or the magnitude of what he is doing. Again and again, instead of being on Jesus' side, they are on their own side. Bound up by their own egos and insecurities. Too interested in their kingdoms to be interested in the Kingdom of God. Does it sound familiar? Does it sound like the church at its worst today? ...Disciples in it for themselves, demanding rewards from Jesus and arguing over who among them is the greatest. Today, I think we still need to hear these words from Jesus that the greatest are the least. And the first will be last. It is so easy to forget and misunderstand and get into our own little battles with each other. "Look at this child," Jesus says, "This is who you are fighting for. This is whose side you are on: These little ones. The vulnerable, the defenseless. Those trapped by the evil of this world. By hunger or sickness or anger or apathy. Those possessed by demons that tell them

they are pointless. That their lives are worth less and they are worthless. As my disciples, says Jesus, I want you to go up against this darkness with me.”

Jesus understands why he is here. He is here to go up against the darkness and grab it by the lapels and cast it out. And apparently, others have seen what Jesus is doing. Other healers. Other magicians. Other hucksters who might be imitating Jesus for a buck. We hear in today’s reading, that others, apparently, are also casting out demons. And apparently it works. “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, I command you to come out.” That’s all they have to say. Some are doing it without being authorized. The disciples have seen it. They have seen these ‘others’ casting out demons and they know it isn’t right. They come to Jesus. They are very upset. “Jesus, we saw someone casting out demons. Jesus, we saw someone doing it in your name. Jesus, we tried to stop this guy. We tried, Jesus, because he isn’t following us.”

Notice what the disciple says. He’s “not following us.” Not “he’s not following you, Jesus”. He’s not following ‘us.’ If he’s not following us, how can it be right? Forget that someone was healed. And that their

mind was blessedly their own. And that their spirit was restored and that it had been done in Jesus' name and Jesus got the credit. "We tried to stop him, John says, "We tried to stop him. Because he wasn't following us."

The disciples tried to stop him. He was doing something they should be doing. And that bothered them. Earlier, the disciples had tried to do the same thing. They had tried to cast out a demon. They had tried to help a little boy and they had failed. And Jesus had to come and do it himself. With just a word from Jesus, the demon fled. "This kind can only come out through prayer." Jesus had told them. The kind of prayer which saves the sick as it says in James. The kind of prayer from the righteous which is powerful and effective. Which the disciples were unable to produce.

They couldn't cast out demons and yet this other non-follower of Jesus could. This non-disciple, who was not one of them; in the name of Jesus, he did what they couldn't do. And here's the kicker. When they tell Jesus about what he is doing, Jesus doesn't seem to care. You can almost hear the disciples grumble: "But Jesus, he's not one of us. He's not

authorized. He's not part of our group, our church, our denomination.

He's not a Protestant. He's not Presbyterian. He's not a believer in the tenets of Calvin or justification by faith alone. He isn't following us."

But Jesus says, "So what? It's one less demon in the world and one more person who has their life back."

Jesus tells the disciples: "Do not stop him. Whoever is not against us, is for us." Jesus is telling them to think again about who they are taking sides against. He's telling the early church to think again about all the other Christian communities out there. Other believers who do things differently. He's telling us today, "Think again about those you don't approve of. Who are doing good things, who are healing creation, and standing up against evil, and casting out the darkness in people's lives. Do not stop them. Do not stand in their way. Whoever is not against us is for us."

What I hear Jesus saying is that I should remember that I follow Jesus. I am on his side. And I am for his work. And he is for God's creation. He is for the little ones out there. He is for restoration and new life. And he is against the darkness of hate. He is against the insidious power of

greed. He is against those demons of worry and regret and despair that trap us and imprison us and keep us from God. Jesus is for us, all of us. And we are for Jesus. We are for his grace. And for his love. And for his forgiveness and redemption.

This week, Pope Francis has been visiting the United States. Perhaps you have followed some of the coverage. From his visiting with Congress to visiting with the President, I've been impressed how the Pope has kept his focus. He has stood before the world's most powerful leaders and told them that they are to care for the environment and to look out for the world's most vulnerable. At Madison Square Garden, in front of 20,000 people, he spoke up for immigrants and the outsiders which some politicians here and abroad regularly disparage. He said: "Beneath the rapid pace of change, so many faces pass by unnoticed because they have no 'right' to be there. They are the foreigners, the children who go without schooling, those deprived of medical insurance, the homeless, the forgotten elderly. These people stand at the edges of our great avenues, in our streets, in deafening anonymity." And there with them, the Pope said, is where God is present.

Jesus tells his disciples not to stop those who are standing up to the darkness. He warns them not to trip up those who are just beginning to believe. And then he recommends something I would never recommend. That we should be willing to cut off our own body parts if they get in the way. That hands or eyes or feet should be removed if they cause another to stumble. Some scholars say that this is just a manner of speaking. Jesus is using hyperbole; he is not literally saying that we should cut parts of ourselves off or we will suffer eternal punishment. I don't know. But I do know that Jesus sounds very serious. He is very serious about us not tripping others up. Especially the little ones; the vulnerable, the defenseless. The impressionable ones who believe that we believe in Jesus. Who believe that like Jesus we will give our lives for the life of the world to free creation from the powers of darkness. "Be careful, Jesus says. Fights between disciples, between churches, between faith communities, cause the little ones to stumble. They cause those who might have hoped in me to turn away." So I have to ask myself: As a disciple, when people see how I treat others, are they tripped up by my attitudes? Do they fall away from God because of my words and

actions? Or do they fall in love with God because of them? Because of me, do they stumble on their way or do they stumble into a new way of forgiveness and mercy?

The good news is that even if we disciples don't understand, Jesus does. Even if we stumble, Jesus will not. Even though we also bound up by the darkness and despair of evil, Jesus is setting us free. So what obstacles keep you from that good news? What road blocks have kept you from knowing the healing love of Jesus? What needs to be removed from your life? Even if it is as significant as a hand or an eye or a foot. What attitude? Or preoccupation? Or self-given righteousness? And let us pray. Let us pray for Jesus to remove those stumbling blocks. Let us pray for Christ to cast out the darkness. Let us pray to be for Jesus and for his grace and for the little ones among us. Let us follow Jesus as he gives his life for the life of the world.