

# **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**IN PIECES? LET US PRAY TO THE LORD**

**Mark 9:38-50**

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Marcus Felde**

38John 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." 39But 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. 40Whoever is not against us is for us. 41For 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.

42If 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. 43If 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. 45And 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. 47And 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, 48where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49For everyone will be salted with fire.

50Salt 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.”

*Author’s Note: I have enhanced the labels of the six steps, so that you may also read them like this, as we use the law to uncover the depth of sin and its consequences and the Gospel to discover the comprehensiveness of what God does for us in Christ.*

*Step one: Notice how love is just not there. Step two: Notice a diagnostic connection to misplaced faith. Step three: Notice how the above goes with having no hope. Step four: Notice how Jesus extends hope as a gift. Step five: Notice how that gift is received when we have faith in him. Step six: Notice how that empowers us for love.” So faith, hope, and love abide, **these three**; but the greatest of them is love.”*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Divide and Get Conquered**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem, Lack of Love for others)** : *In Pieces*

“We tried to stop him!” The disciples tried to import into nascent Christendom the old habit of delineating boundaries: Me here, you there. Never mind that the guy who bothered them was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. He wasn’t keeping time with them, wasn’t an actual *disciple* disciple. So they tried to stop him. Which Jesus rightly warned them against, since they were likely to put a stumbling block in front of that person, and remove him from the umbra of Jesus’ aura.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem, a Misplaced Faith)** : *Missing the Point*

The disciples were missing the point of what Jesus was doing. It

wasn't all about being adherents of a religion. It was about having faith in the God of Jesus. By putting a stumbling block between a person and the One in whom they were to place their faith, the disciples were using old wineskins for this new wine.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem, No Hope) :** *Sav(i)orless*

How can you season salt that has lost its savor? Not.

**PROGNOSIS: There Is One Body, and One Spirit (and Salt is Good!)**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution, Hope) :** *Jesus Incorporating*

I take these verses, these pericopes-within-the-pericope, to be intimately related to each other this way. Jesus is saying, "If you want to cut something off, don't cut off one of my members. Cut off one of your own. For it is unity-with-me, finally, which gives life. Better to be a one-eyed lame child of mine, with my life in you and the kingdom of God as your heritage, than to be physically fit, attractive, and rich—but with nowhere to go but down, way down."

I've seen geckos' tails writhe after becoming detached, and chickens running around with their heads cut off, but trust me, it doesn't go on very long. Jesus, by dying and rising for us, through our faith in him, in-corporates us into himself, there to live eternally.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Advanced Solution, Faith) :** *Put 'er there!*

To review the negative, the *stumbling* Jesus is talking about in verses 43-47 ("If your hand causes you to stumble . . ." is the same *stumbling* Jesus was talking about in verse 42, namely, a falling away from faith in him. Not stumbling as in doing something bad, like stealing. Please! To "cause to stumble" is

to “cause to let go of their association with me.” Conversely, the Faith which gives us life is: attachment to Jesus. Faith in the hope Jesus gives by his accepting and blessing us.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution, Love) : *In Peace***

The end or purpose of this faith is that we should live *together*. In peace. At peace. “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” As one. With the kind of tender care of which the corresponding Second Reading (from James) gives a few examples, all of which include the phrase “one another.” Look after each other. I like Ephesians on this: “For there is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling.”

Contrast the “Hypocritic Oath”: “Damn you! Stop doing that!” Which is to say, cut off anything that looks like it might be necrotic, or like it might become necrotic, or that bothers you in any way, especially if it might interfere with your personal efforts to be good.

And the “Hippocratic Oath” (Jesus’ update): First, do no harm. “I, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).