

# Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus commends self-maiming

Mark 9:38-50

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
analysis by Ed Schroeder

Dear Sabbatarians,

It's a cold rainy Saturday morning here in Klaipeda on the Baltic coast and the RCL appointed texts for Pentecost 19 (September 28) are not exactly bright and sunny either. In the day's Gospel, Mark 9:38-50, Jesus commends self-maiming (hand, foot, eye) when a body part "skandalizes" you out of God's kingdom. He concludes with an enigmatic word about salt and peace: "have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

The OT text too, Numbers 11, is not immediately uplifting. It recites the grocery list of the Back-to-Egypt movement among the wandering Israelites. They are fed up with manna—right up to here! "Meat, meat, meat," is their cry. Whereupon God has a snit: "I'll give them meat till it's running out of their noses!" By eventide quail are falling and filling up the camp to a depth of 3 – 4 feet. And then God sends a plague besides. All of this while Moses complains: "God, you got me into this mess. Get me out of here."

Patently upbeat is the 2nd lesson, the last 8 verses of James, about "the prayer of faith, of the righteous," and its effectiveness, along with admonitions to "restore the wandering" and "covering a multitude of sins." OK, but that's James, and we all know what Luther said about THIS

epistle—even though he did translate it during his stay in the Wartburg hideout and include it in the September Testament of 1522.

Nevertheless, here's an attempt to work out a Crossings matrix for the Gospel. Mark 9:38-50.

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## Introduction:

- A. Forget not the overall “ochlos” motif in Mark’s theology: Jesus, the outsider Messiah, for outsider/marginated people.
- B. The exorcist whom John tries to thwart is an outsider even to the circle of the 12, but he says he’s working in Jesus’ name. In Mark’s theology any outsider “in Jesus’ name” is an insider. “In Jesus’ name” signals to whom the exorcist belongs. Such a person is inside the kingdom, inside God’s mercy-management takeover operation. Exorcism is one of Mark’s favored ways to report God regaining ownership of folks previously possessed (literally) by alien owners. In English “in someone’s name” is a metaphor for ownership. So also for the NT: “In Jesus’ name” is “being Jesus’ own.” Ditto for the phrase “bearing the name of Christ” (NRSV) in v. 41. “Who belongs to whom” is the cantus firmus of the first part of the pericope (38-41)—and maybe even of the second about scandal and self-maiming (42-48), and possibly even of the third about salt and peace (49-50).
- C. The Greek verb “skandalizein” is Mark’s “bad news” term for four verses in a row (42-47). NRSV renders it “stumble,” NIV “cause to sin.” I think the NIV is over-moralizing here and (therefore ?) possibly missing the point entirely, while NRSV’s “stumble” is not very specific. “Skandalizein” in the Gospels usually signals

“taking offense” at Jesus himself, his suffering servant profile, his failure to look like a “real” Messiah. Using my new Schmoller Handkonkordanz (just shipped in from a Tuebingen bookstore) I see that Mark also uses the term four other times: 4: 17, 6:3, and 14:27,29. In all of these four it is impossible to render the term “cause to sin.” In the last three of these 4, and quite likely in the first of them as well, the term indicates being “scandalized” about Jesus himself. So we will use that meaning in our matrix for Mark 9.

- D. There are no hints in the context of v. 42 that “the little ones” Mark speaks of are children. The few other times Mark uses the term “mikroi” it is never with reference to children either. So these little ones are more likely the “little people,” the ones who are considered to have little value, in short, the ochlos-outsiders. It was the ochlos-outsiders who on other occasions in Mark did “believe” in Jesus, did “hear him gladly,” “ran ahead” to where they thought he was going.

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## DIAGNOSIS

### STAGE 1

Disciples Scandalizing the Marginated Followers of Jesus  
Scandalizing the outsider–“outsider” by whatever standard of exclusion, yet one working “in Jesus name”–as John does (v.38), or scandalizing the “little ones” who believe in Jesus–“little” by whatever standard of measurement–is a constant temptation when followers of Jesus consider themselves to be insiders. All the more likely if they have just argued among themselves about which of them is the greatest (v.34).

### STAGE 2

Disciples Themselves Scandalized by the Ochlos Messiah But such behavior points to their being scandalized about this Jesus themselves. The folkloric trio of terms—my hand, my foot, my eye—portray the totality of my personal self. Thus when I scandalize the Christ-followers mentioned above—by whatever means—I am holding onto [hand], following [foot], having an eye out for, a view of myself and my world that does not need this Ochlos Messiah. Offended (scandalized) by the Messiah that Jesus genuinely is, I myself don't "bear the name of Christ," don't "believe in him." With the result that I myself have not yet, and, if I persist, will...

### **STAGE 3**

Never Enter Life, Never Enter the Kingdom Keeping myself intact, preventing my heart's theology from being maimed, guarantees that I never enter Life (43, 45), never enter the Kingdom of God (47). Two images vividly portray the end of the line of such perverse discipleship: Gehenna, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where the composting worms never die and the smoldering fire never ceases, and trying to survive in the sea with a millstone around the neck.

## **PROGNOSIS**

### **STAGE 4**

The Ochlos Messiah goes to Gehenna, takes the Millstone for his own Neck Jesus does not delight in his disciples continually being scandalized by him (v. 32). So what he says in the three passion predictions, he finally carries out. He offers his sweet swap to his Gehenna-bound, sinking disciples. That creates the "peace" (50), the shalom, the end of hostilities twixt God and sinners.

### **STAGE 5**

The Salt and Fire of Faith Faith's own sweet swap: gladly "maiming" the self that I so desperately seek to preserve in

exchange for the Life, the Kingdom (=God's mercy-management of me and my world) offered in the crucified and risen Christ. That means I trust that in Christ I really am at "peace" with God. This Peace, appropriated by faith, salts sinners with fire. Not Gehenna's fires, of course, but the fire of God's own Life.

## **STAGE 6**

The Salt and Fire of Following the Ochlos Messiah With this "salt (and fire) in yourselves," disciples practice "peace with one another." The words "with one another" render the Greek phrase "ev alleelois," the grace-imperative ping-pong batting back and forth of what God in Christ has pinged over to us. Though peace-full, this lifestyle is not passive, but fiery and salty. Fire and salt change whatever they touch. The changes generated by the ping-pong of this fire and salt can be as simple as "a cup of water to drink" (41) or as feisty as rescue operations to Gehenna itself, so others who have "stumbled" into it may yet come out alive.

Peace & Joy! Ed