

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

BE AT PEACE

Mark 9:38-50

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Paul Jaster

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

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

49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt 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.”



DIAGNOSIS: Missing Out

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Monopoly Madness

Why do Christians fight and war with one another? How can we promote Christ's peace for the world when we can't find peace among ourselves? My favorite neighborhood playmate was David Smith. He and I would play Monopoly for at least 10 hours every day over the summer—morning, noon, and night. I can still recall the day I found out he was a Roman Catholic in the Land of 10,000 Lakes where even the cows are Lutheran. And I thought to myself how sad it was that I would not see him in heaven. Soon after, I discovered he did not believe in Adam and Eve. And then I knew for sure he was going to hell. Much later I found out that I must have done more than just “think it to myself”; my dad told me 45 years later Mr. & Mrs. Smith came over to our house to tell my mom and dad to quit having us Jaster kids ram

our religion down their kids' throats. Oops! God forgive me. I was part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Sour Grapes

Take the good news message for today. Jesus had just predicted his death a second time...and said that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all...and held up a little child as one who is so welcomed in the kingdom. And yet, John, speaking for the Twelve, comes up to Jesus and says, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Jesus must have just shaken his head and let out an inner scream. Hadn't he just told them one verse earlier to welcome all—even the smallest child. And hadn't the Twelve just tried to do an exorcism themselves...and failed! because they had too little faith?

Obviously mixed with their complaint is one big dose of "sour grapes." This unconventional exorcist is doing something the Twelve cannot do. And nothing ticks us off more than another branch of Christianity doing something better than can we. And I still smell a lot of sour grapes in our own church and denomination today as we jealously see other churches thriving and growing.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Missing Out on the Kingdom

Jesus give his ultimate diagnosis in shocking terms. It is better to cut off your foot or hand, or to pluck out your eyes, or to be thrown into the sea with a great millstone tied around your neck than to become a stumbling stone and a roadblock to someone else's faith.

The disciples are not only grumbling. They are dense. They are not catching on to what Jesus is saying about the cross, suffering and servanthood. And so, the inner Twelve are in

deadly danger of being cut off from the kingdom of God. Which is so dangerous and terrifying that it would be better for them to go through life maimed than to continue on the path they are currently going.

PROGNOSIS: Included



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Salted by Christ's Sacrifice

But, salted with Christ's sacrifice, things change. And we begin to catch on to what Jesus is saying. We strive as followers of Jesus to be "at peace" with one another. We face evils out there that are larger than any one of us can imagine. So, we need more than just a "teacher" or a "healer." We need a "Savior." We need someone to go to the cross for us. And to confront the great evils of this world head on, including racism, national exceptionalism, white supremacy, the growing gap between the rich and poor, the war among different religions (including those that are Christian and those that are not) and to suffer them away. And to create for us from bottom up, through death and resurrection, the possibility of a new way of living. Jesus is this Savior. Jesus is this Confronter and Sufferer. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life—as John was so fond of saying after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Welcome Help

Thanks to Jesus and many others (Christian and non-Christian) I have come to learn a thing or two since my early years. We should welcome help wherever and whenever we can find it—whether somebody does something “big” like casting out demons or something “small” like offering up a cup of cold water.

And so, for the record I want to say, “I’m sorry, David. I am sorry Mr. and Mrs. Smith. How blind of me. I see other Christians and other people quite differently now. You are colleagues in the faith. You are helpers and mission partners. You are not the enemy or the competition. We face a common foe. And Christ’s kingdom comes when, salted by Christ’s own life, death and resurrection, we work together rather than go our separate ways.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): At Peace with One Another

“Do not stop him;” Jesus says of this commissioned exorcist, “for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” At stake is the good news message of Jesus Christ. How can we be convincing promoters of Christ’s peace, a peace this world so desperately needs, if we cannot be at peace with all who serve Jesus one way or another, whether they know it or not?

This is Christianity in its most basic terms: “Have salt in yourselves [that is, Christ’s life, death, and resurrection], and be at peace with one another.”