

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

THE US IN JESUS

Mark 9:38-50

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

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. 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. 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. 49"For 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."

DIAGNOSIS: Against Us

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Not Following Us!*

The disciples notice an anonymous someone using the “name of Jesus” to cast out demons (v. 38)-and, evidently, successfully so! Instead of identifying him as “one of us,” as one of Jesus’ own, the disciples identify him as being “against us” and want to stop him. Why? Because he is “not following us!” (v. 38). In effect, the disciples have made a grave mistake in equating “us” (the essential mark of their identity and unity) with their cozy circle of relationships, what we today might call our “institutional makeup” or denominational affiliation. In effect, their cozy circle of relationships was actually becoming a “stumbling block” (v. 42) to widening the circle of followers of Jesus, the (Jesus) “Us.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Excluding the name of Jesus from Us*

By so placing themselves against this anonymous someone, who obviously lived in the power of the “name of Jesus,” tragically, the disciples are subtly, but decisively, making the mistake of placing themselves “against” Jesus himself-literally casting Jesus out of their “us.” For to be “against” anyone who lives by the power of the “name of Jesus,” or to place a “stumbling block” (v. 42) before the “little ones” who believe in his name, is to be against Jesus himself. While the disciples put up the appearance of following Jesus, in reality they were against him, betraying him, anything but trusting in him and his name.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Excluded from the Kingdom of God*

As Jesus gently, but clearly, explains to his disciples, they are facing the ultimate danger: exclusion from the Kingdom of

God, that is, being “thrown into hell,” into the unquenchable fire (vv. 46-48). As difficult as this point is for us to utter-Jesus himself even speaks of it in the passive tense, so as not to have to actually name the subject of the throwing-it is inescapable. There is no shortage of images in today’s reading for describing the destructive consequences that lay before the disciples at this moment in time. The disciples thought for some reason that they were privileged insiders in God’s Kingdom. But no such status belongs to them or anyone! “Everyone is to be salted with fire” (v. 49), says Jesus. That is, the justice of God will reign. Moreover, “salt is good” (v. 50), he says; that justice is good and right. Yet, truth be told, it can’t help but leave us all with a flat taste in our mouth.

PROGNOSIS: For Us

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Restoring the Saltiness of God’s Justice: Seasoning God’s Justice with Jesus Mercy*

Can this state of affair be changed? When salt has lost its saltiness, can it be restored? Can God’s justice become good news for sinners? Sounds impossible, yet with God nothing is impossible. And the strange way this impossible things comes to be is through the death and resurrection of the Son of God, the very Jesus who is telling us all this. In the cross and resurrection, Jesus is acting “for” all those for whom the salt of God’s justice has lost it saltiness. In his cross and resurrection, Jesus takes that “flat” tasting justice of God-the due recompense for sinners-and seasons it with his unique kind of justice, which is mercy, grace, forgiveness, the promise of resurrection. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the justice of God itself is now transformed into the forgiveness of sins. In Jesus, the impossible has happened. The salt that has lost its saltiness has had its saltiness restored! Justice becomes mercy; the grave becomes a womb; death becomes the pangs

of new birth. In the words of our text, he establishes “peace” with the justice of God, which makes “peace with one another” (v. 50).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Bearing the “Name of Jesus” in Us*

What Jesus has done in his death and resurrection becomes ours by faith. To live by faith is to live as that unknown “someone” at the beginning of our text lived, in the power “of Jesus name.” To live by faith is to live as the “little ones who believed in him,” with Christ defending us against all that would try to separate us and cause us to stumble. To believe in Jesus is to “have salt in yourselves” (v. 50), the mercy of Christ seasoning the justice of God bringing forth new life in his name. Faith so connects with Jesus that our lives become indistinguishable from his and our destiny becomes one with his. To believe in Jesus is to become part of the “Us,” one with him and he with you.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Redefining Us*

Becoming one with Jesus in faith unites us to all other believers as we are united to Jesus. That truth radically shifts our view of who “Us” is. “Us” is not defined by the externalities of life-hands, feet, or eyes (vv. 43-47)-or by the circles we travel in, but by “the name of Jesus” that we bear. “Whoever is not against us (whoever bears the name of Jesus) is for us,” (v. 40) says Jesus. Indeed, “whoever gives a cup of water for you to drink because you bear the name of Christ,” no matter what crowd he or she travels in, “will by no means lose the reward” (v. 41). That is, they will be regarded as one of “Us.” Concerning those little ones in the household of faith: we would do anything for them, including cutting off a hand, a foot, an eye, or anything that would jeopardize their faith and their status as one of “Us.” That’s just the way it is with “Us” who bear the name of Christ.