

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Making Insiders Out of Outsiders

Mark 9:38-50

16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

Analysis by James Squire and Ed Schroeder

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: Insiders Become Outsiders

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Marginal Followers of Jesus

As different as our world today might be from Jesus' world, the circumstances he exposes are familiar. Just like the disciples, we modern humans divide the world into insiders and outsiders. When people belong to a cause or organization, we expect them to "put in their time" before they are accepted as members; and once they are inside we expect them to follow certain rules. Membership signifies that individuals are committed to the goals of the group-not just seeking personal glory. For instance, people are not allowed to practice medicine, law enforcement, and various other disciplines without first being trained by masters in their field. In the church some believe that longtime members of a parish are more trustworthy and faithful-especially if they have "done their time" on various church committees. Conversely, when we see someone who doesn't fit our neat mold of a faithful Christian-someone who does ministry in unfamiliar, unprecedented ways-we automatically view them with suspicion. Like the disciples we conclude, "They're not doing it our way. There must be something wrong with them." But, in this text, Jesus says to us, "Your way? I've got news for you, if they are doing it in my name, they are doing it my way, and I choose to call them allies and friends."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Scandalized by the Outsider Messiah

We have a problem: We have made discipleship about doing things "our way," when it is supposed to be about doing things "Jesus' Way." We've done this because personally we are not very fond of Jesus' Way. So we have sought to improve on the way Jesus does things. Our worldly perceptions cause us to stumble over Jesus

the Outsider Messiah (vv. 42-47). He seems to let people gain membership too easily (v. 40). His standards seem too loose, too flexible, too generous. In truth, we really are offended (scandalized) by the Messiah whom Jesus genuinely is. Therefore we have a hard time doing deeds in his name with much integrity, because we don't really "believe in him" (v. 42).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – No Life, No Kingdom

To be scandalized by Christ (to stumble over his claim on us) is a double-edged sword. Not only are we choosing the old familiar ways-to live, to be church, to do ministry-over serving in Jesus' name, but by making that choice we exclude ourselves from his kingdom. In response Jesus says, "If you insist on making your own way, then hell is what you deserve (vv. 46, 47). If you insist on promoting your own self-interest instead of following me, then finally you will be the outsider-outside of my kingdom. But, fair warning: It would be better to live life with only one eye, one foot, and one hand-ame and blind-han burn in hell," he says. At least if you are lame and blind you still have a chance at entering the kingdom.

PROGNOSIS: Outsiders Become Insiders

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – The Messiah Who Goes to Gehenna

In Jesus' day if people wanted a picture of what Hell was like they could look to a place called "Gehenna"-a garbage dump outside the walls of Jerusalem. If one wanted to know about humiliation and cruel death (something akin to drowning with a millstone around your neck) they could go to another place outside the city walls called "Golgatha." The walls of Jerusalem kept insiders (clean, righteous, alive) in and outsiders (unclean, unrighteous, dead) out. Jesus told his followers three times in Mark 9 and 10 that he would soon be an outsider (suffering and dying at the hands of insiders); he also told

them that he would conquer death. But telling them did no good. What saved them and what saves us—who are scandalized by Jesus' Way—is that Jesus actually went to Gehenna for us and died the death we had coming to us. Jesus intervenes on our inevitable death, and turns it inside-out, giving us life in its place. Ultimately, Jesus takes the millstone we deserve upon himself and goes down to Gehenna, so that we can breathe freely in his promise.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – The Salt and Fire of Faith

Through Christ's death we have been set free to see the world Jesus' Way. And through the eyes of other outsiders who witnessed Jesus' death, (like the centurion in Mark 15), we know the death that we were spared. We also know that we have been given new life in Christ instead. Suddenly, preserving the world's status quo about insiders and outsiders is not half as important as living life in Christ. We need not fear being outside God's grasp—Gehenna cannot touch us now that we have been spirited into Christ's kingdom. We have much to rejoice over, because in Christ we have peace with God. And knowing this peace kindles new life in us; it salts us sinners with fire (v. 49). Rather than fearing Gehenna's fires, we trust in the One who salts us with fire.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Salt and Fire for One Another

Kindled by life in Christ, we no longer have any reason to view “outsiders” with skepticism. On the contrary, we are encouraged to have salt and fire in ourselves and to practice peace with one another. The words “with one another” (in Greek “*en allelois*”) remind us to practice with each other the peace Christ has already secured for us with God. But this peace-full lifestyle is not by any means passive—it's fiery and salty. And fire and salt change whatever they touch. We fiery/salty

followers are encouraged to serve others with an act as simple as offering “a cup of water to drink” (v. 41); or we may choose something as daring as a rescue operation to Gehenna (call it preaching the Gospel to sinners), so that others who have “stumbled” may yet come out alive.