

**Proper 21b
Mark 9:38-50
September 27, 2009**

This is the point in Mark's gospel where we all start to get just a little bit fed up with the disciples. They are so stupid. They are so wrong. They are so dense. They want to argue about who's going to be first in Jesus' kingdom. They try to tell Jesus he doesn't really have to die. They complain about pushy outsiders and hangers-on who try to join their Disciples-Only Club.

Even Jesus gets a little bit fed up with the disciples. At the beginning of this ninth chapter of Mark, in a story we did not get to hear today, Jesus' disciples try to cast a demon out of an epileptic boy, and they fail. And when the boy's father asks Jesus to do what his disciples could not do, Jesus snaps at them, "you faithless generation! How much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you???"

So even Jesus gets a little edgy with his most faithful followers when they do not display to advantage. He gets cranky at these moments when his friends appear petty and self-serving and exclusionary and jealous. Look at today's lesson. Here's someone who is actually ABLE to cast out demons in Jesus' name. And isn't it ironic that the disciples, who couldn't cast out that demon earlier, suddenly get all protective of their group and their stature and their identity.

They run to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us."

Us? Following US? Wrong pronoun, guys. If anyone is being followed it's Jesus. Not you John, or your brother James or your buddy Simon Peter, either.

It's so ironic. So bitterly ironic. The closer they get to Jerusalem, the more clearly Jesus speaks about his mission, his destiny with death, his true identity as a Messiah who will give it all away for the love of the world. And the closer they get to Jerusalem, the more clearly Jesus tells them who he is, the more obtuse the disciples become. They willfully misunderstand him. They defiantly cling to their vision of a Messiah who will conquer, a Savior who will bring the Chosen People back to power.

The disciples think they've got God on lockdown. They think they've got this Messiah business all sewed up. They've put God in a box of their own devising. So when some stranger comes along, using the name of Jesus and doing the very things they were not able to do, they get offended. He doesn't fit in their box. He can't really know their God. Jesus ought to stop him right now, this outsider, this interloper.

But Jesus knows what the disciples still cannot comprehend. God is bigger than their box. God's ways are not their ways and God's rules are not their rules. That whoever is not against Jesus is for him, and that besides John and James and Peter and the rest of the twelve, other people are also catching a glimpse of this Kingdom of God that Jesus is talking about. They're seeing it, and welcoming it, and letting it fill their hearts and minds and spirits with new life, new power, new joy. And the disciples can't stand it because they did not invite these people into their exclusive club.

No, no, no, Jesus says. Don't stop them. Don't shut them out. Don't do those hateful, exclusionary things that might cause these folks to stumble on their way into the Kingdom. It would be better for you to wear cement overshoes and sleep with the fishes than to cause these folks to stumble on their way to the Kingdom of God.

Christians have a lot to answer for these days. Have you been out there in the great secular world and tried to tell a new friend or a new colleague that you are a follower of Jesus Christ? Have you felt the suspicion and fear that rises up in them when you say those words, "I am a Christian"?

If anyone was interested in seeing what it was like to follow Jesus and to love your neighbor as yourself, they could certainly be scared off in a hurry by people who purport to be Christians.

Apart from the long history we share of Christian idiocy ... the Spanish Inquisition, the pogroms, evangelizing the New World at sword point, the public relations on Christianity today is not good. We are seen by the world around us as haters. Haters of gays and lesbians, haters of Muslims, haters of abortionists, haters of the government. There are always some people with signs showing up on the TV news to let the world know that Jesus hates ... somebody.

The latest was on Friday when 3,000 Muslims gathered for a day of peace and prayer in front of the U.S. Capitol. Noisy Christians with bullhorns hollered at them and said they were going to hell, until the leaders of the prayers had to stop and beg them to simmer down.

"We would never come to a prayer meeting that you have to make a disturbance," one of the imams said to the protestors. "Please show us some respect. This is a sacred moment. Just as your Sunday is sacred, our Friday is sacred."

Or as that great Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

But let's also not think that we can pat ourselves on the back and say that Episcopalians are a nicer, more decent sort of Christian. Because the fights that have gone on in our church over Biblical interpretation and human sexuality and who holds the real power here have revealed us to be as petty as any other sorts of Christians. The fact that our churches are still fighting this stuff out in the secular courts is a scandal. We should be using our resources for feeding the hungry and healing the sick, instead of bankrupting one another with legal fees.

And even here, even at All Saints, we don't know how often we might offend one of these little ones who come here looking for God, by simply overlooking a newcomer or a visitor, brushing past the people we do not know in order to talk to our long-time friends. It is just too easy for any one of us who worships a God of love to behave in ways that ... well, if they aren't actively unloving, they are often indifferent and dismissive. Even here. Even us.

But listen, here's the hardest part of all. This is what the disciples had to learn the hard way, by going to the cross with Jesus and seeing him come out again on the other side. This is the core of the problem. This is the root of our dilemma.

We can make ourselves stumble, too. Each one of us is amazingly adept at holding God at bay. Every single one of us knows how to actively interfere with God's love for us and God's desire for us and God's incessant, unrelenting claims upon us.

We cause ourselves to stumble by putting God in that box. By making God conform to our expectations of God. Maybe it's thinking that God needs to make intellectual sense. Maybe it's thinking that God needs to be addressed with a certain sort of hymn or a certain kind of prayer. Maybe it's thinking that God is there to answer your prayers and make your life work out just the way you want it to. Maybe it's just not thinking much about God at all.

Just like the disciples, we want to put God in that box where we can understand him, and manipulate him and control all the access to him. But God is bigger than any box we can devise, and God comes into our hearts and into our lives to name us, claim us, to insist on all of it, all of us, our selves, our souls and bodies. And we discover that we need both our hands and both our feet and both our eyes and everything we've got to push God back into that box,

And God says "LET ME OUT. And let me in. Into your heart. Into your life. Into the deepest corner of your soul. Let me show you how big I am and what great, big incredible dreams I have for you."

What metaphoric hand or foot do you have to cut off to get out of God's way? What metaphoric eye do you need to pluck out to see ... to truly see the depth of God's desire for you and the magnitude of God's plan for you?

Listen. Everyone will be salted with fire, Jesus says. So it's up to each of us to choose what kind of fire we want to be salted with. The fire of hell ... which in Greek is Gehenna. Gehenna was the name of the trash dump outside Jerusalem that burned day and night. Do we want that fire, the fire of Gehenna, the fire of daily, stinking, living death?

Or do we want the fire of the Holy Spirit, God unboxed and unbound, burning in us and through us, unstoppable, unquenchable, transforming us ... utterly and forever?