The Diocese of New Jersey—Online Sermon

18 Pentecost—Proper 21—Year B—September 26, 2021

James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38–50

Preacher: The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, *Bishop of New Jersey*

*“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”* Mark 9:38

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”* That’s what John says to Jesus. What?! Haven’t you been listening to me? Haven’t you been paying attention?! *That* should have been Jesus’ response.

Apparently, we are still in a home in Capernaum, perhaps Jesus’ own home. That’s where we were last week, when Jesus said to his disciples *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all”* (Mk 9:35). It’s where we were when he took a little child in his arms and said to them, *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me”* (Mk 9:37). Yup, we were with Jesus and his disciples in a house. And apparently, he’s still teaching them about discipleship. It’s also very likely that child is still in his arms. John shares a concern, *“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us”* (Mk 9:38).

Not following *who?* Not following us?! Shouldn’t it be “not following *you?”* meaning not following Jesus. As one commentator observes, John addresses Jesus as “teacher” and then demonstrates that he “has not followed Jesus’ teaching.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jesus answers John, *“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. Whoever is not against us is for us”* (Mk 9:39).

Scholar Amy Oden, commenting on this passage observes, “Jesus warns that finger-pointing and scrupulosity about others can distract us so that we do harm and cause others to stumble. Sometimes, even our best intentions to reprove others can have unintended consequences for innocent bystanders. Indeed, great damage is done to the gospel when Christians are preoccupied with infighting and self-righteous proclamations about others.” She adds, “Jesus returns the focus back to our own behaviors, the ways we speak and live good news, and the ways we place obstacles in the way of that good news.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

How often we create obstacles for one another. How often we create obstacles to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Checking in on our own behaviors is important. Today’s reading from the Letter of James offers some guidance here—*“confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed”* (James 5:16). It points us to humility with one another. Too often, today, humility seems in short supply.

As Jesus brings John up short, calls him to a more generous response to others “doing deeds of power” in Jesus’ name, even if they are not following “us,” he brings home his point to John and all of them. Returning to the child that is apparently still in his arms. “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” (Mk 9:42). He’s using exaggerated language here and in the next several verses, but he’s making a point.

As Ogden observes, “Jesus immediately turns the tables on the disciples, warning them that *they* are the ones in danger of doing harm. It's as though Jesus says, "The problem is not the folks outside our group. Don't worry about others -- they are not the problem. Rather, look to yourselves. How are *you* getting in the way of the gospel? How are *you* a stumbling block?"[[3]](#endnote-3)

She concludes, “This week’s gospel lesson invites us as congregations to examine the stumbling blocks we place, often unknowingly, often in faithful enthusiasm, in front of the most vulnerable among us.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Today’s Gospel reading is difficult. It contains a lot of challenging material, again mainly through the use of hyperbole, exaggerated language. But, as difficult as today’s Gospel is, it also contains at least a hint of hope and Good News—Salt—Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt. 5:13). It’s implied in Mark. Jesus didn’t just leave his followers mired in his challenge. He gave them a hint. Salt—an essential—a preservative…

*“For everyone will be salted with fire. 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”* (Mk 9:49).

In the ancient world, salt didn’t merely add flavor and zest, it was an essential preservative for food and life. Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Mary Healey commenting on this passage writes, “Jesus is speaking of salt as a necessary quality in his disciples, the quality that keeps their spiritual life keen and vibrant.”[[5]](#endnote-5) She continues, “Perhaps ‘fervor’ would best capture the meaning and sums up by observing, “The disciples’ conversations with one another and with outsiders must be marked by fervent love for Christ that leads to humility. It is,” she writes, “their spiritual intensity, kept alive through profound conformity to Jesus in his self-emptying love, that will bring them into unity with one another.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Profound conformity to Jesus in his self-emptying love…

Just a chapter before today’s Gospel reading, Jesus had said to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it” (Mk 8:34-35).

This past week, The House of Bishops met virtually for our annual fall gathering. Our Presiding Bishop, The Most Reverend Michael Curry called once again to his vision of “beloved community” He said to us, and says to the wider Church, “COME AND SEE …We are becoming a new and re-formed church, the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement— individuals, small gathered communities and congregations, whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love, no longer centered on empire and establishment,

no longer fixated on preserving institutions, no longer shoring up white supremacy or anything else that hurts or harms any child of God. By God’s grace… WE ARE BECOMING A CHURCH THAT LOOKS AND ACTS LIKE JESUS.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

This, this, it seems to me, is a church with salt in itself…Don’t you long for such a church? Don’t you long to be part of such a church? Don’t you want to be part of such a church? “Follow me,’ Jesus says. “Follow me…’

1. Ruge-Jones, Philip “Commentary on Mark 9:38-50”—*Working Preacher* website for September 30, 2018 found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50-3>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Oden, Amy “Mark 9:38-50 Commentary by Amy Oden” - Biblia.work website found at <https://www.biblia.work/sermons/mark-938-50-commentary-by-amy-oden/>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Oden—*art.cit.* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Oden—*art.cit.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Healy, Mary *Catholic Commentary on the Sacred Scripture—The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 193

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See “A Church that Looks and Acts like Jesus” on The Episcopal Church website at [A Church That Looks and Acts Like Jesus—The Episcopal Church](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/church-that-looks-and-acts-like-jesus/) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)