

SECOND READING: Mark 9:38-50

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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.”

FIRST READING: James 5:13-20

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13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

### **“A Big Kingdom”**

*When I was a girl, growing up in a house in Nebraska with 3 sisters, a mother, father, grandmother and many pets, I recall my mother sometimes saying, in her frustrated mom voice, “You’re all going to have to just get along”! I particularly recall her saying this when we were locked up together...during a blizzard, for instance, when, in the interest of survival, we needed to keep our larger purpose in focus, to get along and go forward as a family. Mom was, you see, a very clear-thinking practical woman.*

I thought of this when I read today’s lectionary passage from the Gospel of Mark. If you recall, Jesus and his disciples were walking and talking their way to Jerusalem. The disciples evidently ran into a person who was casting out demons. The man was relieving intense misery, following Jesus’ example, doing this work in Jesus’ name, but he wasn’t one of THEM, one of the twelve. This fact bothered the disciples. Notice the pronouns: *“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in YOUR name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following US.”* The disciples didn’t think claiming to be a follower of Jesus and doing his work in the world was enough. A person had to have gone through what they’d gone through, subscribe to their perspectives, and act the way they acted.

Jesus, probably in his frustrated savior voice, responded, *“Do NOT stop him... Whoever is not against us is for us.”* With these words, Jesus was saying that his mission is significant, challenging, urgent and it can use help from any and all. The disciples seem to have not understood this, nor did they GET that they needed to accept allies wherever they could, even allies who did small gestures in Jesus’ name such as giving a cup of water to the thirsty.<sup>1</sup> With these words, Jesus was letting them know that he was NOT establishing an exclusive club or privileged clique. He was leading a movement. It wasn’t a competition, us vs. them. Important words. Our son brought a plaque from Costa Rica which I see every day above our kitchen sink. *“Quien no está contra nosotros es para nosotros”*. *“Whoever is not against us is for us.”*

Then Jesus went further. In essence, he said, *“Don’t put a stumbling block before those who are trying to help”*. Jesus didn’t want his disciples thwarting the good work of other believers

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<sup>1</sup>Brian McLaren. Sermon: “Is Religion Just Another Tribal Marker?”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ9Ud16mNGw> (accessed 9-27-18).

...doubting their faith, pointing fingers at their differences, objecting to their methods. He was concerned for these excluded ones who would get discouraged and lost and quit the cause, but he was also concerned for his disciples because stumbling blocks, you see, thrive on blind rules and stipulations, on judgements and manipulation, on stiff arrogance and pride.”<sup>2</sup> Stumbling blocks impede the faith of the stumbler and the stumblee (so to speak).

Jesus didn't want this, not then, not ever. But, yet, that's exactly what the Church has done so often over the centuries, and sadly, what the Church still tends to do. Believers tend to set standards of what constitutes genuine Christianity.<sup>3</sup> We find ways of dividing ourselves up into groups, to build fences, and encourage “*better than Thou*” attitudes. Haven't you heard the following: “*We're more evangelistic, more spiritual, more Bible-based, more Orthodox, purer, freer, more liturgical, more contemporary, we understand the truth, we're the ones going to heaven*”? Haven't you heard some of those? I have. Rev. Dr. David Lose says that the Church has often had a lack of “empathetic imagination”, not seeing God to be at work in and through others who bear the name of Christ but disagree with us profoundly on some issue.<sup>4</sup> Have you not also heard the phrase, “*You can't be a Christian if you (blank)...believe this or that, agree with this person or that one, vote or support this way or another?* Just think of the battles, the violence, the real wars between believers in the name of the Christ over the years! The schisms and divisions in the Church are legion. I think it must make Jesus simply weep. No, not just the 12 disciples have said, “*we tried to stop him, because he was not following US.*”

Then Jesus said something sort of weird. He said, “*If your hand, your foot or your eye causes you to stumble, cut it off, tear it out.*” Certainly, Jesus was not advocating for us to hurt ourselves. No, with this hyperbole, I feel confident he meant the same as when he said, “*Get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.*” (Mt 7:5) He meant the same as when he said, “*Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*” (Mt 7:1) He meant the same as when he said, “*Let any one of you who is without sin be*

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis. “*Stumbling blocks everywhere.*” 9/24/15. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-09/stumbling-blocks-everywhere>. (accessed 9-28-18).

<sup>3</sup> Brian McLeran.

<sup>4</sup> David Lose. “*Accepting a Cup of Water*”. <http://www.davidlose.net/topics/preaching-2/dear-partner-in-preaching/> (accessed 9-28-18).

*the first to throw a stone.” (Jn 8:7). He was saying, “Look, guys! Religious people are always focusing on the person over there, but they’re not the enemy. The enemy is in you. Focus on yourself... your own arrogances, bad motivations, biases and judgments. Focus on that part of you that wants to make yourself elite and greater than all. Get rid of that stuff. Purify yourself with salt and fire. Consider instead what your hand, your foot, your eye can do to welcome people who are willing to join the journey. Your hand is that with which you act, exhibit power and strength and skill. Your foot is that which moves you, takes you places, drives you. Your eye is that with which you see, perceive, view the world.”<sup>5</sup>*

One commentator offers some questions for us, members of Christ’s church today. He asks, “Can we imagine that God is at work in and through someone who bears the name of Christ but disagrees with us profoundly on some issue that we see as important? Can we stop trying to convince someone, or worse, condemn someone, when we think they are wrong? Can we instead try to understand what experiences have shaped their views? Can we imagine that given the enormity of the challenges in front of us, there may be good ideas coming from persons with different perspectives? Can we accept a cup of cold water from someone who does not follow us?<sup>6</sup> They’re good questions, I think. They remind Ken Kesselus and I of a poem by Edwin Markham: “*We drew a circle that shut him out. Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win. I drew a circle that took him in.*”<sup>7</sup>

Now, I do need make something clear. I am not saying that we need quit discussing hard issues, issues on which we do not agree. They need be grappled with in love because the Spirit works in our struggle. The Spirit reveals important truths to open minds through struggles. Yet, we need keep in focus our common purpose. In the interest of survival, Jesus’ church needs get along and go forward as a family.

*Some of you may recall that last May I took Mike’s mother to Las Vegas to attend a memorial service for his uncle. Mike stayed home with his dad. His uncle was a life-long,*

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<sup>5</sup> Brian McLeran.

<sup>6</sup> David Lose

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Markham, “*Outwitted*”. Quoted in: K Kesselus. Sermon: *Look for the Commonality*” <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2018/09/09/look-for-the-commonality-pentecost-19-b-september-30-2018/> (accessed 9-28-18)

*devout member of a church which does not recognize the ordination of women and certainly not a woman minister from another faith. This is a deeply held, time-honored, and, from their perspective, supported position. But surprisingly, on the morning of the memorial service, Mike's aunt, also a member of that church, openly, and in the presence of church leaders, gathered together all her family, gay and straight, Republican, Democrat, Yankee and Southerner, Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, and asked me to say a prayer over her husband's ashes. I was so humbled and honored. We stood in a circle together surrounding the urn, held hands, and I, a female, Presbyterian minister, not even a blood relative, but yet sister in Christ, led them in prayer. With the Spirit's help I prayed to celebrate a great life, to hopefully comfort the family, and most importantly to witness to the resurrection of his, of my, and all of our Lord and Savior. It was a sweet moment in a stressful time, a time when the base purpose of the church universal needed affirming. I am grateful that Mike's aunt was open to the Spirit that day. A big lesson was learned by all.*

Friends, it's the lesson Jesus was trying to teach so long ago on that road to Jerusalem, to the cross. It's a lesson about the kind of Christians he calls us to be. You and I, part of the church universal, need not hinder people who do not think just like us, who do not practice the Faith in the same way, who come at it from different places and histories. The Church needs never, even inadvertently, make others stumble with rules and stipulations and petty requirements. We need instead to make paths straight and work to remove stumbling blocks when we see them. We need try to get along and go forward as a family. Jesus is challenging us to see things from his perspective, to see a big kingdom, his kingdom made of many diverse parts...to see the whole, beautiful big kingdom that he is bringing through disciples like us, disciples who do works of love and peace, and mercy and justice and reconciliation in his name.

*"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. Whoever is not against us is for us'."* Amen.