

September 30, 2012

18th Sunday after Pentecost

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

Care-less Discipleship Gets the Boot

The bible is a library of 66 different books. Christians believe they tell the story of a self-giving, faithful God who will go to any lengths to prove his love for the world, even suffering injury at the hands of others and death on a Roman cross.

So why in the world does this same bible contain a passage like the one we just read? Why in the world is Jesus, the one who usually heals body parts, talking about cutting them off?

First though, let me tell you about a man named Ray.

I met Ray at Bergen Mercy Hospital when I was doing summer chaplaincy work there in 2006. He was from the neighborhoods of south Omaha and both emotionally and physically, he had lived a hard life. But Ray was tough... and he so both emotionally and physically, he was a strong man. Yet Ray was also diabetic and despite every attempt at prevention, poor circulation and infection meant the amputation of one of his legs. And even with Ray's strength, it was devastating loss. I learned a lot of things that summer and one of them was that losing a part of your body is catastrophic.

So again I ask, what in the world is Jesus talking about?

Well first and foremost, he is NOT telling anyone to literally hack off body parts because we sin. If that were the case, the whole world would not only be blind but headless as well because our thinking is the real cause of the problem. Besides, Jesus doesn't even use the word "sin" but rather he is concerned about "stumbling". Clearly he is using language that intentionally shocks. But why is he so concerned about "stumbling blocks"? And why did he have to make it so personal?

Maybe we need to go back to what started this all in the first place. The disciples, who usually come across in Mark's gospel as confused but harmless, decide to finally take the initiative. They see someone else doing what they are supposed to be doing and they get territorial. They become sectarian. They believe *whoever is not with them is against them* and they try to stop a man from helping other people simply because "he was not following us". US! They didn't seem to care if the man was following Jesus or not. But they did care that he was not one of them.

And like a doctor, whose goal is saving lives, Jesus immediately recognizes that attitudes like that are poisonous infections and if left unchecked and unstopped, they will quickly lead to spiritual death and destroy our common bonds of humanity. Jesus did not come to the world to form another little group that claims it's way is the only way. Jesus came to **be the way** for **all** people to experience the grace and mercy of a loving God.

“Stumbling blocks” are those things that get in the way of people following the way of Jesus. Stumbling blocks cause people to fall and falling can be life threatening. The older you get, the more you understand that. So Jesus uses strong language in response to a strong threat. His warnings are intended to be a motivator for change in our lives. And he makes it personal because Jesus knows our tendency: we can quickly point out how others may cause us to stumble but we avoid thinking about how our own actions or inactions cause others to stumble.

And that's why we still need these difficult, provocative, unsettling words of Jesus. They can't be explained away. They can't be ignored. They shout their message in bold print, all CAPS, with a thousand explanation points behind! If it's better to be thrown in the ocean wearing cement shoes, if it's better to amputate a body part or two, then the condition has got to be serious and we had better pay attention.

How do we place stumbling blocks in front of others who want to walk in the way of Jesus? I think mostly by being careless. That's how a lot of trip ups happen. Something I read this week put it this way, *“Carelessness in discipleship can do irreparable damage to those most vulnerable within the body of Christ.”*

How are we ‘careless’ in discipleship? I think it's mainly when we think “church” is somehow different from “regular” life. We say, “don't lie...you're in church”. “Don't curse you're in church”. “Don't call people names, you're in church”. Brothers and Sisters if you think it's wrong to do something in church why in the world is it right to do it anywhere else? There are little eyes always watching and young ears always listening. You and I are always examples of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

What stumbling blocks do we leave laying around in our carelessness? Well let me ask this: “Does yelling at the refs during sports games affect the discipleship of our youth?” They would say it does. They would say, and have said, “What good does coming to church do. I've seen people there pretend to be all nice to one another and then they just yell at the refs like other angry parents or they talk about people in the grocery store like other gossips and I don't see how any of this makes a difference”

That cuts deep because I know I have been careless in my own discipleship. I know that despite being a pastor and I'm supposed to know better, my own faults and failings and territorial attitudes have likely done harm I may not have even realized.

So is there any good news in all of this? I always ask the confirmation youth to write about what “good news” they heard in the sermon. Today the good news comes with a grain of salt. Not in the sense that it shouldn't be trusted but in a sense the modern world has a hard time understanding. Salt in the ancient world was the most precious of commodities and as such it was even a part of the sacrifices the Israelites made to God. Salt was the difference between preservation or starvation. Having salt allowed security (and hope) for the future.

Salt was used to ratify treaties and agreements and was therefore a sign of a lasting covenant. When Jesus tells the disciples to have 'salt in themselves' he speaks of a lasting bond that will join them to one another and to God. We believe that bond, that covenant, is established and ratified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself.

Earlier Jesus reverses the usual assumption of whoever is not with us is against us. **Jesus says whoever is not against us is FOR us.** It is an opening of the door that invites more and more people to do God's work in the world and it lets us know that we are not the ones in charge, God is. Our efforts will not usher in the kingdom of God and our failures will not prevent it. God has a **way** of picking up people when they fall, of healing the wounds that happen when we stumble and of empowering us to live in ever better ways, even if we must do so without some of the parts we think are essential. And Jesus is that way. Believing in him and trusting his love for us does things for us we could never do on our own and it gives us a strength we never knew we had.

My friend Ray discovered this as well. He lost a leg and yet he did not lose his life. With the help of family and friends, some of whom he had been at odds with for many years, he remodeled his little house to accommodate a wheel chair. He bought an exercise machine and strengthened his arms so he could get around on crutches. Losing a limb was difficult to say the least, but it was the only thing that saved his life. And saving lives is what Jesus Christ came to this world to do. He is the light who shines in the darkness and shines through us to all the world. Light is how we avoid stumbling. Light allows us to be care-ful instead of care-less and light makes fear vanish to make room for peace. This is our hope and our salvation. Amen.

Hymn of the Day, "Christ Be Our Light" ELW #715