

September 27, 2009
Careful Not to Stumble
Mark 9:38-50

³⁸"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

³⁹"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

⁴²"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where "'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" ⁴⁹Everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted.
Thanks be to God.

"Who do you say that I am?" These are the familiar words we heard just a couple of weeks ago in our lectionary reading. These are the words Jesus spoke to His disciples and in doing so caused quite a stir amongst them. Peter's famous "You are the Christ" answer; followed by Jesus, "Get the behind me Satan" response to Peter's eventual attitude concerning the need for the Son of Man to suffer, die and rise again; lead Jesus and the twelve on a few days of awkward discussions and silent responses full of angst.

We encountered one of these discussions last week. Recall that one they reached their destination, Jesus called the twelve to Him and inquired about an argument the disciples were engaged in as they passed through Galilee. The twelve responded to His initial inquiry with silence, but Jesus knew that they had been arguing about who was the greatest amongst them. Jesus took the opportunity to teach them an important lesson

concerning the need for us to serve others; to become a “servant of all.” His teaching contained images of children. Some have interpreted His imagery to signify the innocence and simplicity of our response to serving others. However, as we heard last week, children were not revered in Palestinian society the same way they are today. The images Jesus offered us were more of a warning that we must meet the needs of those who have been forgotten, placed aside, disenfranchised and marginalized by society.

This week’s reading is a continuation of last week’s; offering us additional insight into the mindset of both the disciples’ need to be elite and Jesus’ response to their need. Before we continue this morning let us prepare our hearts and our minds to receive God Word as we go to Him in prayer. Let us Pray.

Gracious God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, source and giver of the Holy Spirit, we are made in your image and our journeying here leads us towards finding ourselves in you.

Gently you draw us into closer communion, revealing yourself, encouraging our development, offering us a pattern, watching over us as we grow, blessing us with your Spirit, and finally receiving us.

We have moved away from this relationship, we have tried to develop our own ways of doing and being, we have been reluctant to follow the pattern of Jesus and we have too often relied on our own strength and the uncertain team spirit of humankind.

May our prayer and our praise open for us again the doors of life abundant. Show us where our true personality is found and by your spirit enable us to be the people of your calling, the community of your love; salt, and yeast to the society in which we live. Amen!

Taking Jesus’ lead, let’s again think for a moment about children. Let’s think of them for a moment in the more modern sense; their innocence, naivety, and their ability to make

the whole world seem less full of hope and less despairing, if only for a moment, is such a gift that children bring into this world. Have you ever watched a child as they begin to walk. It is a whole new experience for them. Throughout their infancy, children gain the strength that is needed to prepare them to lift their heads, to turn over, to eventually crawl around and begin to explore the world around them. Imagine how miraculous it must be for a child to go from a limited view of the world on their back, to discovering there is more around them when they begin to lift their head and roll around; to go from a limited two dimensional view of existence in crawling to one that gives them a 3-D perspective as they learn to pull themselves up from the floor and stand. Then they begin to walk and inevitably their awkwardness combined with the laws of physics and reality cause them to do what all children do, as every one of us here has ourselves, experienced. They stumble and they fall.

The image of stumbling becomes our underlying theme and focus from the gospel reading today. Just as children stumble when they begin to explore and challenge their new found world when learning to walk, we too find ourselves afforded many opportunities to stumble as we begin to explore and challenge our new life in Christ as we learn to walk by faith. When a child stumbles and falls, there is always an element of danger involved; a danger to the well being of the child. Equally so, there is an element of danger when we stumble in our walk of faith. Jesus warns of two different dangers in our reading today; the affect of our stumbling on others creating a sort of domino or snowball effect, if you will and the danger of the affects we can impede upon ourselves. As Christians and as a Community of Faith, we must be careful not to stumble and we must certainly be careful not to cause others to do so. So then, what must we watch out for?

Our Affect on Others

Look back at verse 38 from our reading today, "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." Here John, having taken on the role as spokesman for the twelve, indicates to Jesus that they believe they have unearthed a scandal; someone outside their elite circle had been caught in the act! Caught doing what? Caught sinning? Caught speaking against Jesus teachings or caught not carrying out the law? No. The one they had *caught* was acting in Jesus' name; in this case, he was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. How terrible! We are the twelve, they must have thought. That is our *Job*; our *privilege*.

I think you begin to see here that the whole discussion concerning who is the greatest among them has not ended; in fact, we may even see here what started the whole argument to begin with. Earlier in the chapter, sometime between Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am" and the disciples' heated debate on the road to Galilee, the disciples found themselves unable to exorcise an unclean spirit from a boy they had encountered. Now, just a short period of time later, with their failure still on their mind, they want Jesus to give them permission to forbid someone from attempting to do the same thing, but successfully.

Have you ever found yourself unable to carry out what you believed to be God's plan for you only to turn around and see it occur with someone else? I have! Let me give you an example. We've prayed many times for our own Bud Bowen to gain healing and relief from his recent pain and we have seen little to no result. Then, we attend services in Clayton and in an evening's moment, He is relieved from his pain. Now there are two ways we can view this, one is through reaction and the other is praise. Through reaction, I might say that it isn't right that he should receive such healing in another church, because we are his church family and responsible for his well being, or we can approach his healing with praise and shout, Hallelujah, Praise God that Bud has been relieved from his pain. The afore mentioned reaction makes it about us (allowing ourselves to focus on the things of man), where the later makes it about God (allowing ourselves to focus on the things of heaven). Peter was warned about such behavior, equating him with Satan Himself. Like

Peter then, the disciples have now found themselves reacting when they should have been praising.

So Jesus says (verses 39 – 40), cut out all your elitist nonsense. Stop resting on your egocentric view of privilege. The man you are clamoring about was acting in my name, that is, the man was acting under the authority of Jesus. How can that be wrong? The phrase, 'In the name of Jesus' isn't some formality we stick on the end of a prayer. It is meant to express the reality of a life lived under the reign of God, in relationship with Christ Jesus and therefore with His authority.

The man that the twelve encountered is different than the one we see later in Acts 19:13 who tried to cast out demons, unsuccessfully 'in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches,' because the 'whom Paul preaches' indicates that the exorcism is being done without a personal relationship, but rather as mimicking something observed. The man the twelve encountered is by all accounts and purposes a disciple, himself. He has a God-given ministry. He is doing the works of the Kingdom. Through this man and his ministry, "The Kingdom of God is breaking forth. . ." Why oh why then would you oppose him, asks Jesus?

Now Jesus is a master teacher and so he responds to them in two ways, the first with a little positive reinforcement and then second with a warning. First Jesus tells them that if you act compassionately (giving a cup of water to a disciple (verse 41), giving someone the opportunity to serve as acolyte or light the candles, the opportunity for someone to sing a special song during service or to preach a message God has laid on their heart. Giving someone a ride to church or to Tuesday bible study with the hope that they will both receive and be a blessing) these are the things that please God. But Jesus warns them secondly when he talks about the perilous danger of causing 'one of these little ones who believe in [Him]' to stumble (verse 42).

Recall that Jesus has drawn attention to these 'little ones' and in doing so has paralleled their place in society with those who have been forgotten, set aside,

disenfranchised and marginalized by society. It is equally important for us to recognize this morning that all those who have come to know Christ have, for some reason or another, identified themselves as unable to “do it on their own.” We, as Christians, become the self-aware disenfranchised and so the ‘little ones’ referred to here by Jesus refer to any who have come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior.

We are in danger of causing a believer to stumble when we prevent him or her from exercising their ministry. In essence, we don’t let them, as it were, ‘give a cup of water.’ We must learn to encourage, support and build up one another in our faith, offering opportunities for safe, unobtrusive dialogue rather than telling others how we feel they should minister or react. If I want to go out into the streets of down town Athens and minister to the homeless, then encourage me or even join me, but don’t tell me that I shouldn’t because it is too dangerous or beneath me to do so. If one of you wants to hold bible study in your home on Thursday evening, then encourage them or even join them, but don’t tell them that they shouldn’t because we already have a Tuesday Group they should join. If there are those who identify as LGBTQ and are bringing the message of Christ into their communities, as we are here in Toccoa, GA, then encourage them or even join them, but do not tell them that they cannot carry out the work of God or the message of Jesus Christ because they do not “fit their mold” of what *they* think it means to be Christian.

New Day Worship Center of Toccoa is a member of the International Christian Community Churches. There are many open and affirming denominations out there that we could be affiliated with or we could choose to be independent as so many of our sister churches have successfully chosen. One reason we hold to the values and vision of ICCC is their affirmation of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5-10). As a member of the Church universal we are each called by God to a personal ministry of the Gospel of Christ in the Church and in the world. We have all been deemed ministers by our active participation in sharing Christ’s Good News. As members of the priesthood, we must all take ownership

of our role and responsibility to carry out God's plan set out for us and we should be especially cautious not to impede that role and responsibility in others.

There are many opportunities for you to serve here at New Day. Church cleanup, bible study, scripture reading, call to worship, lighting of the candles, announcements, prayers of the people, serving as acolyte, ushering, serving communion, and on and on and on. Be careful, however, not to take your sense of self-esteem from the job or task that you do. Be careful not to find yourself caught up in the same argument that the disciples found themselves in before reaching Galilee. True self-worth comes from knowing how much we are loved by God, not by what job or task we do for Him. If lighting the candles or leading bible study means something special to you then do it. If God has given you that passion or that call of service, it should mean something special to you. Just be certain that it is special because you are serving God, not because you are serving your pastor.

In all that you do or don't do, be it preparing a dish for our Sunday pot luck, providing paper towels or Kleenex for the church, skipping bible study for a movie with a friend or denying a ride to someone to church because they have not offered to help pay for gas in the past, always ask yourself this question, "Am I causing others to stumble? Am I preventing other people from acting in the name of Jesus?" It is a very serious question and we should be very mindful of our response.

Today is our sixth month anniversary and together we have made great strides in healing old wounds and bringing hope to a community that has been hurt. We've literally knock down barriers to bring people into this community of faith and so I urge you as we continue to grow that we stay focused on Jesus as he leads today and refrain from petty arguments that may cause others to stumble. This evening at 6:00 we will continue our look at Mark 9:38 – 50. Jesus not only warns us about our affect on others, but he also speaks to our affect on ourselves.

Bow your heads for just a moment and contemplate God love, your relationship with Him and listen for His voice and discernment in your life this morning. What is God saying to you? Is he saying, "well done my good and faithful child", or is he saying, "Wake up, you're missing the point." Is He calling you *child* or is He is telling you that He does not know you? Is He calling you to further your walk with Him this morning, to allow yourself to be challenged by Christ Love or is He inviting you to begin a relationship with Him today, to come to know Him and to lay claim to His eternal Grace and Mercy? What is He saying to you today?

[Pause]

[Invite Those Who Need Prayer To Alter]

[End With Prayer]

Amen!

Our Affect on Ourselves (Evening)

Jesus' solution to sin in our scripture reading today is that you cut off your hand or your foot and tear out your eye, if necessary. Is this really what Jesus meant, was he being literal? Some Christians believe so. It is my understanding that some have cut off delicate parts of their anatomy to prevent falling prey to temptation while others have refused to become organ donors in case their eyes were donated to someone who would use their eyes for lustful purposes.

When my great nephew Hunter was first learning to talk, he wouldn't refer to animals by their name, but rather by the sound they made. For example, he called a frog a "bibbit" or a dog a "woof woof." It was much like this with the language of the Palestinians. It was their custom not to refer to an activity but rather the specific member of the body that was responsible for the activity (William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 347). Jesus then, as a good Palestinian Jew, used graphic, real-life language, not to call us to engage in radical self amputation, but to make a point about our ministries. While Jesus is

calling us to self harm, He is making a point; one we would be wise to listen to. When it comes to ministry and carrying out God Will for our lives, nothing is meant to get in the way; not gas money, not a failed offer to buy lunch, not our distaste in low sugar grape juice during communion nor our need to be the greatest amongst us.

Perhaps those who have the most affect on themselves are those who have been Christian for many years. Over time we can become content and even self-righteous. We meander about at a low level of expectation and service and do not allow ourselves to be confronted by the radical demands of Jesus. When we first began our walk of faith, the world of Christian living held our interest with amazement and enthusiasm for Jesus Christ, but that enthusiasm can soon wane as we allow ourselves to become consumed with responsibilities and challenges. Some would rather their faith become a comfort rather than a challenge.

The reality is that in both these areas, causing others to stumble and causing ourselves to stumble, Jesus gives some grave warnings if we ignore his call. If we cause others to stumble, impeding their opportunities to assist the Kingdom of God in breaking forth, then, he says, it will be better to have had a millstone hung around our neck before being thrown into the sea (verse 42). Then we have the unfathomable option of self amputation as a warning not to allow ourselves to stumble. It is worth noting that when Jesus speaks of being "thrown into hell" (vv 44 - 48) that the Greek word for *hell*, *Gehenna* is the Greek name for the Hinnom Valley, where the people of Jerusalem send their sewage through sewage channels and where trash and the carcasses of animals constantly burn ([Follow The Rabbi](#)).

Here, like the amputation language from before, Jesus language concerning being thrown into this burning landfill is every bit the same real-world use of metaphor. However, it is not without its point. Here Jesus is making it painfully clear that there are two distinct choices that we must make concerning our eternity. One choice is full of joy and will bring

us into the eternal presence of the Father. The other is empty, without joy, void of the presence of the Father's love. For those of us here today who know of God's grace, we should not have a problem in choosing, should we?

Look now for a moment back at verses 49 and 50.

⁴⁹Everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

What does Jesus mean when he says "have salt in yourselves"? Salt served a very useful purpose in hot climates before the invention of electricity and refrigeration. Salt not only gave food flavor, it also preserved meat from spoiling. Salt was used as a symbol of fellowship and the common meal. The near-Eastern expression *to betray the salt* meant to betray one's Master or some person who was owed loyalty and devotion. Leonardo da Vinci in his painting of the Last Supper depicts Judas in the act of tipping over the salt shaker, thus symbolically identifying himself as the betrayer of his Master. Jesus used the image of salt to describe how his disciples are to live in the world. As salt purifies, preserves, and penetrates, so the disciple must be as salt in the world of human society to purify, preserve, and penetrate that society for the kingdom of God and of his righteousness and peace. (Don Schwager)

What did Jesus mean by the expression "salted with fire" and "salt becoming saltless"? Salt was often put in ovens to intensify the heat. When the salt was burned off and no longer useful it was thrown out on the road or on the roof top where it would easily get *trodden upon*. Perhaps Jesus wanted to contrast useful salt used for giving flavor and for preserving food with salt which was burned and no longer of much benefit, to encourage his disciples to be faithful witnesses and to not neglect the opportunity to influence others for the kingdom of God through the witness of their lives and their testimony to the power of the kingdom of God. (Don Schwager)

Bow your heads for just a moment and contemplate God love, your relationship with Him and listen for His voice and discernment in your life this morning. What is God saying to you? Is he saying, "well done my good and faithful child", or is he saying, "Wake up, you're missing the point." Is He calling you *child* or is He is telling you that He does not know you? Is He calling you to further your walk with Him this evening, to allow yourself to be challenged by Christ Love or is He inviting you to begin a relationship with Him today, to come to know Him and to lay claim to His eternal Grace and Mercy? What is He saying to you today?

[*Pause*]

[*Invite Those Who Need Prayer to Alter*]

[*End With Prayer*]

Amen!