

September 26, 2021
Lectionary 26 (B)
Text: Mark 9:38-50

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Jesus' words to his disciples, and to us, in our gospel reading are so over-the-top, so disturbing. But I invite you to hear them like you would a fire alarm, to focus your attention on a serious danger. The world is in desperate need of change. It's like the human family is on fire with conflict and greed and resentment. And Jesus was calling followers to show the world his way of peace, his way of compassion and forgiveness, his way of healing for the human family. But his followers were acting like they hadn't understood a single thing he'd said. So Jesus sounded the alarm to call them back to his way of love and service, his way of compassion and generosity and humility.

This feels like a truly timely message. Over the past 15 years, there has been a dramatic change happening with religion in the United States. We've gone from being one of the most religious countries in the world to one of the least religious countries. And it's not just that our society is becoming more secular. We're becoming more secular because prominent religious voices give religion a bad name. The loudest voices that claim the label "Christian" are angry, condemning voices. They've equated being Christian with being anti-gay and anti-abortion, instead of loving your neighbor as yourself and living with compassion and forgiveness. They make Christianity appear ugly and exclusive and judgmental and self-serving. And that is driving people, especially young people, away from religion. We need to hear the alarm that Jesus sounds.

Last week we heard about how the disciples were jostling and competing with each other for status, arguing about who among them was the greatest. Jesus tried to put a stop to their self-promoting behavior, pointing them instead to his way of compassion, of really seeing and recognizing the needs of the most vulnerable ones among them. He wanted love of God and love of neighbor to be the focus of their lives, not just "what's in it for me." But at the beginning of today's reading, John spoke up to demonstrate that Jesus' gentle correction hadn't stuck. He reported quashing the efforts of someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name, but who he said "wasn't following us." It's almost as if here were suppressing some sort of copyright infringement. It makes me wonder—did John really imagine that the grace and healing power of God were his to control, his personal property?

That self-importance and arrogance led Jesus to sound the alarm. He told John "don't stop that man from casting out demons." And then, Jesus gives a response in the three parts. Although he starts with a positive image, his language becomes more intense, until finally his way of speaking is not only over-the-top, but genuinely disturbing. But we need to remember that it is for the purpose of getting us to recognize, and avoid, a real danger.

First, Jesus says to his disciples, "Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." God will notice and bless even the smallest gesture of kindness that furthers Jesus' work of peace and healing, because there is not a surplus of good in the world. The world desperately needs what Jesus has to give. So Christ's disciples must not hinder or limit it in any way.

Secondly, Jesus says to them—and to us—to beware of causing any child of God to stumble. Perhaps you can hear the alarm rising in Jesus' voice by the darker, more troubling imagery he uses. It would be better to have a huge, heavy millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to cause harm to any child of God, to damage their ability to turn to God in faith. Wow! Our words and actions really do have the ability to hurt others, whether it's a dismissive judgment or just a matter of only paying attention to our own needs or feelings. So it would be better to sleep with the fishes than to hurt one of God's little ones, because every single one of those little ones is precious in God's sight. Jesus uses a really serious image to communicate his alarm to his disciples. He is calling them to lives of compassion and forgiveness, because that's what a genuinely human life looks like. That's what life with God looks like. And since the disciples weren't getting it, Jesus sounded the alarm.

And in the third part of Jesus' response, his alarm is loud and clear. His manner of speaking is really very disturbing. If your hand causes you to stumble into sin, or your foot, or your eye, cut it off, get rid of it! It is better to share life with God with only one hand or foot or eye, than to have two of everything and be cast out of God's presence, to be thrown into hell. These words feel like a slap in the face. They're so ugly! We need to recognize them as hyperbole—words that are way over the top! Obviously, Jesus' work of healing would not be served if we were to start lopping off hands or feet, especially since Jesus said previously that the source of our trouble is the human heart—our wants and desires, how we're always tempted to put ourselves first, and put ourselves above others; how we're so easily motivated by greed or selfishness or self-importance. But Jesus wants to get our attention, to help us see those things that can seriously damage our lives, those things that separate us from God and harm our relationships with each other. So we mustn't tolerate them or they will steal the joy from our lives, or even rob us of life itself. And they rob the world of being able to see what the love of God looks like, what the compassion and forgiveness of God looks like, in the flesh.

What the world needs most is to see and feel the love of God through the lives of God's people. The world needs to see the story of Jesus reflected in lives that are humble and gentle, compassionate and forgiving. We have all known people like that, people whose lives shone with such beauty, each one in their own completely particular way. With his urgent, totally over-the-top words today, Jesus is calling us to be those kind of people, who reveal his compassion his forgiveness, his generosity. But first, he shows his compassion for us. First, he showers us with his forgiveness. First, he immerses us in such rich generosity that we know in our bones that we are his beloved "little ones." He sees and knows every way we try to be instruments of his peace, try to be his hands and feet, every cup of water we share—and he promises that our reward will never be lost. Jesus knows the ways we try, and sometimes fail. And he holds us in his forgiving embrace.

The world needs a change. The world needs a change that it can see through a changed church that lives with servant love, with compassion and gentleness and forgiveness. Beloved children of God, Jesus speaks to us with such urgency to be his love for his beloved, wounded world. Amen.