

It's Not His Job

Shepherd's Grace Church

September 30, 2012

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸John 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."³⁹But 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."⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us.⁴¹For 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."⁴³If 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.⁴⁵And 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.⁴⁷And 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."⁵⁰Salt 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." (Also read James 5: 13-20)

Are any among you suffering, they should pray! Are any cheerful, they should sing songs of praise! Are any among you sick, they should have the elders anoint them and pray over them! These are the words of James this week as he concludes his epistle. Do you see a common theme? In all things we should pray! There is no reference in the gospel passage this week to prayer, but I believe prayer is squarely at the intersection of James' message and the message Jesus shares with us in Mark's gospel. Did I say prayer...perhaps I should say lack of prayer!

As the disciples continue their conversation with Jesus this morning, they have been admonished for arguing about which of them is the greatest. Jesus wants them to know that the greatest among them must be the least of all and servant to all. They have also struggled to cast out demons on their own. (Mark 9: 29) In this instance Jesus reminds them that prayer is required in all deeds of power. The disciples lack of prayer has left them powerless and impotent in their ministry.

Their first response is to try to build themselves up. This results in their argument about who among them is greatest. When Jesus takes them to task regarding their own self-centered approach, they respond instead with a selfish approach. They relate an event that occurred in their presence. John says, "we saw a person casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he would not follow us."

It is not uncommon for us as human beings to bristle when we are taken to task. We don't like to be told we are doing something incorrectly, or that we are wrong in our understandings. We often find our teeth set on edge when we see others doing something we think we are supposed to do, and doing it differently. We tend to think we could do it better. This past week, I received a facebook note from a friend of mine. His mother was dying and he was in a place of personal reflection. Here is what he said, "I am certainly thinking about death, atonement, and comforted as I am in my knowledge there is nothing beyond death, I am thinking about the importance of rededication of one's measure of life to improve everything you touch."

As I read my friend's thought, I wanted to bristle! Everything inside me wanted to rebel against some of what he was reflecting. Certainly, we can all stand to think about the importance of rededicating our lives to improvement of the quality of life for others. We read in many places in scripture that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves...but there is also a disconnect in my friend's sentiment for those of us who claim to be Christian. My friend says there is nothing beyond death! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! I want to scream! All my training, all my study, all my intellect, all my life are testament to the fact (not the feeling) that there is resurrection and life in eternity beyond this one.

How can my friend, a person I grew up with, attended church with, graduated from high school with, still consider one of my best friends have come to such a seemingly opposing conclusion? It is not like my friend is not intelligent. He holds several PH.d's and is a world class researcher in his field of engineering. Yet, he has come to a conclusion in the face of the same evidence I have used that is completely opposite of mine. As I read my friend's statement, I was in the middle of preparing this message, and I thought of the disciples we encounter today. They encountered someone doing good work for the Lord, but doing it in a different way.

They wanted to put a stop to the work by saying, "*it's not his job!*" The disciples, fresh from their admonishment by Jesus, want to point to someone else and say that that he was doing something he was not supposed to be doing. He was practicing religion without a license! But listen to what Jesus has to say, "Do not stop him. There is no one who does a deed of power in my name who will long be able to speak an evil word against me. Whoever is not against us is for us!" In other words, just because he doesn't do it your way doesn't mean he isn't doing it God's way.

Every week we have our Shepherd's Table ministry meal at Shepherd's Grace Church. We are blessed to share our facilities, our utilities, our fellowship and our food with about 100 persons. By the grace of God, there are four other churches in our community who open their doors in the same way we do. From time to time, I have occasion to talk to several of the pastors who serve these other churches. They tell me they are serving similar numbers of people. I have been to the other meals and know that many who attend our meal also attend other meals, and I have been told that the other churches have different traditions around their meal than we do. One church even makes the people pray and listen to scripture before they are served!

Can you imagine! A hungry person comes into a church to eat and they have to pray first! They have to be preached to first! Some would say that is right...some would say that is wrong! What would Jesus say? It has been my experience that whenever we draw lines and say this side is right and that side is wrong, we often find Jesus standing on the other side of the line from us. Jesus message to us is that no one is to be excluded! Those who worship or serve differently than we do still worship and serve! They are still God's children and they are still called to share God's gospel! As the Apostle Paul says in Phil. 2: 12, each of us must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling!

There are hundreds of denominations of Protestant churches in the world. There are many other faiths and beliefs in the world. Each of us wants to claim our own truth in our faith, but Jesus will not let us have exclusive insight into the truth. He is the truth and it is only as we follow Him that we come to recognize the fullness of that phrase. It is through his love and grace that we are able to stand upright before God! It is in His love and grace that I can say even to my friend who professes no life after death that there are things beyond our understanding and comprehension that remind me of a Love more complete than any I could ever imagine!

I bristle at my friend's statement, but I am reminded that it is not my responsibility to work out his salvation! My responsibility is to share the good news and to trust God to accomplish his purposes through me. I believe that is what Jesus was trying to tell the disciples in Mark's gospel. He pointed out their own shortcomings in their practice of ministry, he taught them a better way and then he set them back to the task of sharing God's message.

He said, none will lose the reward when they offer a cup of water to one who bears the name of Christ! His point is to remind us that there are many who believe but are fragile in their belief. There are many who do good works but who do not yet believe. All of these may come to believe some day, but not if we make barriers to great for them to conquer. All who think about God differently than we do offer opportunities to increase the gifts of the Kingdom. Their perspective might speak to another person more than ours and because of that, they may be the ones who offer salvation in just the right way for another person to grab on and hold on to it. We are all different! We all have different gifts. We all look different to one another, but the one thing we can all count on is that we are indeed all different.

It is in our differences that God will draw our greatest strengths. The one who was casting out demons used the name of Jesus! The disciples forgot to do that when they tried to cast out demons. They learned a lesson (if they were willing to listen) and they could draw on that lesson the next time an opportunity presented itself. Our differences as brothers and sisters can be our greatest gift, our greatest strength for one another...if we are willing to be open to new possibilities.

This week I received this poem in the mail. As you read, reflect on how many people we are repelled by because they look different from us, because they speak with a different accent, because they attend a different church, or dare I say because they attend a synagogue or mosque. How much might we be able to learn from a person like "Ben"

**Minister passing through his church
In the middle of the day,
Decided to pause by the altar
And see who had come to pray.**

**Just then the back door opened,
A man came down the aisle,
The minister frowned as he saw
The man hadn't shaved in a while.
His shirt was kinda shabby
And his coat was worn and frayed,
The man knelt, he bowed his head,
Then rose and walked away.**

**In the days that followed,
Each noon time came this chap,
Each time he knelt just for a moment,
A lunch pail in his lap.**

**Well, the minister's suspicions grew,
With robbery a main fear,
He decided to stop the man and ask him, 'What are you doing here?'**

**The old man said, he worked down the road. Lunch was half an hour
Lunchtime was his prayer time,
For finding strength and power.**

**'I stay only moments, see,
Because the factory is so far away;
As I kneel here talking to the Lord,**

This is kinda what I say:

**'I JUST CAME AGAIN TO TELL YOU, LORD, HOW HAPPY I'VE BEEN, SINCE WE FOUND EACH OTHERS
FRIENDSHIP AND YOU TOOK AWAY MY SIN. DON'T KNOW MUCH OF HOW TO PRAY, BUT I THINK
ABOUT YOU EVERYDAY.
SO, JESUS, THIS IS Ben CHECKING IN TODAY.'**

The minister feeling foolish,
Told Ben, that was fine.
He told the man he was welcome
To come and pray just anytime

Time to go, Ben smiled, said 'Thanks.'
He hurried to the door.
The minister knelt at the altar,
He'd never done it before.

His cold heart melted, warmed with love, And met with Jesus there.
As the tears flowed, in his heart,
He repeated old Ben's prayer:

**'I JUST CAME AGAIN TO TELL YOU, LORD, HOW HAPPY I'VE BEEN, SINCE WE FOUND EACH OTHERS
FRIENDSHIP AND YOU TOOK AWAY MY SIN. I DON'T KNOW MUCH OF HOW TO PRAY, BUT I THINK
ABOUT YOU EVERYDAY.
SO, JESUS, THIS IS ME CHECKING IN TODAY.'**

Past noon one day, the minister noticed
That old Ben hadn't come.
As more days passed without Ben,
He began to worry some.

At the factory, he asked about him,
Learning he was ill.
The hospital staff was worried,
But he'd given them a thrill.

The week that Ben was with them,
Brought changes in the ward.
His smiles, a joy contagious.
Changed people, were his reward.

The head nurse couldn't understand

**Why Ben was so glad,
When no flowers, calls or cards came,
Not a visitor he had.**

**The minister stayed by his bed,
He voiced the nurse's concern:
No friends came to show they cared.
He had nowhere to turn.**

**Looking surprised, old Ben spoke
Up and with a winsome smile;
'the nurse is wrong, she couldn't know,
That he's in here all the while**

**Everyday at noon He's here,
A dear friend of mine, you see,
He sits right down, takes my hand,
Leans over and says to me:**

**'I JUST CAME AGAIN TO TELL YOU, Ben, HOW HAPPY I HAVE BEEN, SINCE WE FOUND THIS
FRIENDSHIP, AND I TOOK AWAY YOUR SIN.
ALWAYS LOVE TO HEAR YOU PRAY,
I THINK ABOUT YOU EACH DAY, AND SO Ben, THIS IS JESUS CHECKING IN TODAY.'**

I am reminded that in Hebrew Ben means son. Perhaps the Son is trying to speak to us in the person of one we might not pay much attention to! I pray you will hear him today. I pray you will pray today! Pray in your joy, pray in your fear, Pray in your sadness and in your hope. Pray and God will draw near. As James says earlier in his Epistle, "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you!"

Pray also that you will not become a stumbling block to those who are trying to believe. Jesus says it is better for you to enter into the Kingdom maimed or lame, or blind than to go to hell for deterring another. Notice how he describes hell. It is a place where the worm never dies. I was curious about that phrase. Did you know that when you see a worm hole in an apple it is because the worm ate its way out of the apple and not into? It is true! The worm is actually born in the apple. Eggs are laid in the blossom and the apple grows around the eggs. The worm then must eat its way out.

Earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells us that it is not anything that comes from without that causes a person to falter, but rather it is what comes from within, from the heart. The worm of hell comes from the heart of a person. The one who speaks evil against others, against Christ has not let the worm crawl out of them and die, but rather has held it in through envy, jealousy, bitterness and hatred! Jesus wants

to replace that worm of death with the love of life! If we allow his grace to guide our lives the worm will be forced out and our sin can die. Sin cannot survive outside. It needs a place to grow and fester. God will force sin out into the open where it can be exposed and overcome!

We all will experience the salt of fire, a time of difficulty that we must deal with. If we turn and look back, we allow the difficulty to overtake us even as it did Lot's wife at Sodom. We isolate ourselves and we become useless to God and others. It is only in looking forward, in pursuing the abundance of life that Jesus comes to give that we are able to season the lives of others. We are called not to be a stumbling block but a stepping stone for others.

If we do not allow others to walk with us in our journey we will lose our zeal for life. Our loneliness and bitterness will overcome the purpose and passion God wants for us. We will lose our flavor. Jesus says, "have salt in your lives! Let that passion out and let it be experienced as God's great gift to you. Then you can be at peace with yourself, you can be at peace with others. It is in this peace, where nothing is missing and nothing is broken, that the fullness of God's Kingdom can be realized! This can only happen as we let others express their love of God and neighbor so that we may learn from them!

Amen!