

September 30, 2018

TEXT: Mark 9:38–50

TITLE: Arguments & Answers: Being Worthy

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Walking down dusty Galilean roads, Jesus' disciples would talk along the way. It was a chance for the fishermen, tax collectors, political activists and humble tradesmen-disciples to get better acquainted. It was a chance to discuss what they'd seen, the miracles that had taken place right before their eyes. Whenever this group passed through a village, they would interact with people as they bought food or filled their water flasks from the city well. They would share stories about Jesus, their teacher and yes, their Messiah—sometimes to sympathetic listeners, sometimes to cynics and doubters. Then they'd be on their way again, walking and talking and simply being together.

The disciples did not agree on everything and were not immune to arguing among themselves. Last week we heard how they argued about who among them was the greatest—until Jesus corrected them and said that greatness is not about status but about servanthood. The last shall be first. This week's passage involves a mild argument between the disciples and Jesus. John decided to share with Jesus about how they had seen someone doing exorcisms, casting out demons and invoking Jesus' name in the process; and how they'd told him to knock it off. John undoubtedly shared this information with a certain amount of smug pride. But his own words betrayed him. John didn't say, "We tried to stop this man because he wasn't following you, Jesus." John said, "*We tried to stop him, because he wasn't following us—wasn't one of us.*" What he was doing mattered less than whether he was a part of the official "Jesus team" so to speak.

So for a second time Jesus had to correct and re-direct his disciples. For a second time he condensed his answer to their argument to a simple phrase: *Whoever is not against us is for us.* Jesus was never worried about keeping tight membership rolls. Jesus was never one to station folks at the door to be gatekeepers deciding who was in and who was out. We know that to be true, even as we don't quite manage to live into its truth—since we put doors on our churches, identifying denominational names on our signs, and regularly find lots of ways to distance ourselves from or show disdain to those who aren't "following us." It is one thing to gently correct someone, so that their lives may be in better harmony with our faith. It is another thing to declare someone is unworthy and has to stop whatever they've been doing. I would content that being worthy is always more about what Christ evokes from you rather than what you claim to possess on your own.

Jesus, being a good teacher, knew he had to say something more to impress upon these disciples that Christian faith isn't about club credentials. So he used a series of metaphors about millstones and fires of judgment to warn them not to stomp on young seedlings in the garden of faith if their goal is to reap a harvest to the glory of the Lord.

At the risk of turning this sermon into a seminary lecture, I need to say a few words about hell. First, I've never been there personally, but I have been stuck in a traffic jam on the New Jersey turnpike, which is assuredly a suburb of hell. Honestly, I'm not sure there is an actual literal location we can identify as hell. Second, much of what people believe about hell doesn't come from the bible. It comes from paintings, poetry, Dante's inferno and episodes of the Simpsons. Hell is much less about devils and flames and more about a willful isolation from God and our fellow human beings. So if your interest in hell is because you'd like to avoid a place like that at all costs, then the topic has merit. If your interest is because you want to be sure the folks you don't like end up there, then you're barking up the wrong tree (to use a Kansas hunting dog reference).

Despite the English translation of Mark 9, Jesus doesn't use the word "hell" in this passage. He uses a version of the word "Gehenna," which refers to a terrible place outside the city of Jerusalem—an old field where long ago babies were sacrificed to foreign gods. It now served as the city dump, with trash fires constantly burning, smoking and smoldering. Jesus isn't giving a lecture on the afterlife; he's building on the warnings he'd spoken earlier—about caring for the little ones, the children and other babes of the faith. He is warning not to be a stumbling block—a boulder thrown in others' path that causes them to veer off the road of righteousness and fall into the ditch of disbelief.

Jesus mentioned the burning dump of Gehenna as a warning: If the things you do with your hands, your job and how you make a living, cause others to stumble, then quit the job. If your eyes are focused on the wrong things and evil priorities, then stop looking there. If your feet are leading you on a road to ruin—if your goals, how you spend your money or how you treat others—are heading away from God, then stop where you are. Think about what is more important—and decide what needs to be done to stay on the straight and narrow way versus the wide gate heading for the incinerators of the closest toxic waste dump.

Your hands, your feet, your eyes, your heart—these are who you are; these are how you connect with others, either in a way that points to God or scandalizes God. In addition to the analogy of the Gehenna dump, Jesus used a second analogy here and talked about salt. He asked: Is your Christian "saltiness" worth anything? Is it still a spice that has value—that preserves faith in others? Jesus hopes so and encouraged his disciples and us to "have salt in ourselves and be at peace with one another."

With that last phrase, we're back to where this passage started: John saying "We yelled at this other faith healer because he wasn't one of us" to Jesus' response "No, whoever is not against us is for us; be at peace with one another." There is much more that can be accomplished to the glory of God when we combine our efforts instead of pretending that our way is the only way. For example, there is a network called the Global Alliance for Vaccination and Immunization (GAVI). Created in the year 2000 and based in Geneva, Switzerland, GAVI works to get children living in the poorest countries immunized and vaccinated against preventable diseases. They bring together private and public sector groups, pharmaceutical companies, and research institutes to

accomplish what couldn't be done if each group worked alone. The Gates Foundation provides funding, the World Health Organization regulates vaccine quality, and government and private groups do the immunizations. So far they've vaccinated over 700 million people, which not only saves lives but keeps people healthier and thereby out of poverty. But vaccinating close to a billion people by the year 2020 is only possible if you work together with a mindset that "whoever is not against us is for us."

Now Jesus' words that day were pretty strong—so I'd be doing the passage a disservice if I wrapped up this sermon and you're still feeling quite comfortable and unchallenged. Listen as Kathleen Norris tells the story of the day she joined a little Presbyterian Church in South Dakota. Here are her words:

It was January, bitterly cold and windy, and I found that the sub-zero chill perfectly matched my mood. I didn't feel much like a Christian. I felt like an outsider in the church and wondered if I always would. But in ways I didn't yet understand, making this commitment was something I needed to do. Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders. One man—I'll call him Ed—I'd never liked him much. He always seemed ill-tempered to me, was a terrible gossip, and epitomized the small mindedness that can make small-town life a trial. The minister had asked him to formally greet the new members. Standing awkwardly before us, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled, "I'd like to welcome you to the body of Christ." The minister's mouth dropped open, as did mine—neither of us had ever heard words remotely like this come from Ed's mouth. I was astonished to realize that while I may never like Ed very much, I had just been commanded to love him. My own small mind had been jolted, and the world seemed larger, opened in a new way. (Amazing Grace, pp. 141–142)

You don't mention things like millstones hung around your neck or smoldering dumps of unquenchable fire unless you mean business with your listeners. Jesus wasn't calling for us to play nicely in the sandbox and be more tolerant of others. Jesus warned us against stopping others who are doing good things out in the world—warned us against stopping others from growing in their faith because of stumbling block words, ideas, and actions we toss onto the road of life. Jesus did that so that they would look around and recognize one another as part of him—as the body of Christ.

The last verses of the letter of James describe what this looks like: Is anyone suffering? Pray with them. Is anyone cheerful? Join them in psalms of praise. Go to those who are sick. Confess your sins to one another—even when Ed is in the group, or someone who's not worthy, who's not "one of us." Being worthy is less about who you are and much more about what Christ evokes from you—how Christ uses you as part of his body. Whoever that happens through—whether through you or those beside you or perhaps that person way over there evoking Jesus' name—it doesn't matter. Like Ed said, "*Welcome to the body of Christ.*"