



Sermon: Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Lesson: James 5: 7-20

Lesson: Mark 9:38-50

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“Is there any congregation in the whole Christian church on earth that you don’t have to leave when you are having a problem you can’t hide?” With this discouraging question, Mary Hinkle Shore begins her consideration of the last few verses of the book of James, a passage of Scripture she cites as the ideal of the way the Church should work. (Shore, “Pilgrim Preaching” Readings for Preachers, September 23, 2003, http://maryhinkle.typepad.com/pilgrim_preaching/2003/09/being_church.html) I wanted to shout to her, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” For I have seen people with problems, with illnesses, with economic issues, with family dysfunctions, tended to with loving care in this very congregation – in fact, in every congregation I have served. I wanted to say, “Yes, Mary, there is such a congregation – come and visit us.”

And yet, I also understood what she was saying, even if I could not agree with her absolute way of saying it. For she went on to say, “Think about the people who have disappeared in the last six months from the pews you know best. What’s going on? Illness? Job loss? Divorce? Hardly anyone leaves church because things are going well for them.” For us, as for most churches I would suspect, the question to us should not be so much “why did those people leave?” (though it is important to know) but rather should be, “why do we *not know* why those people have left?”

Why *is* it that we don’t know people are having marital trouble until there is a divorce and both parties leave their congregation? Why is it that we often don’t know someone has been ill or was in the hospital until they are home again, or we are called to do the funeral? Why is it that in a community where we are called the family of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, drawn by the Spirit into one fellowship of acknowledged, forgiven and redeemed sinners, that we are so fearful of letting others know of our needs, of our weaknesses, of our vulnerability.

There are probably a million reasons – individual to each of us. We don’t want to admit that we have failed at anything – even at things that are not our fault. We don’t feel we know one another well enough to risk exposing our vulnerability. We don’t want to be judged. We don’t want to bore or burden others with our worries. We are not sure that the other will care, really care. We feel that what is happening is *our* personal life, not anyone *else’s* business. We don’t want to intrude on anyone else’s personal life. We don’t want to appear to be judging anyone else.

Both the Mark and the James passages give us some justification for these attitudes. The disciples *are* chastised for judging and attempting to exclude someone who was acting in the name of Jesus, but was not “following us”. The whole book of James brings to our attention failings within the early Church related to judgmental attitudes – favoritism, elitism, misuse of the tongue. We are all too aware that the Church is not all that it is called to be. The Church is filled with people just like us – fallible, uneven in our dedication to living according to the call of God in Christ.

The passages we have read do remind us of this, but they *also* call us to a new way of living, and remind us that we do not live the Christian life in isolation.

Stewardship kick-off Sunday is a very appropriate time for us to consider this teaching. It is time to set aside our pride and our sense of ownership, to hear again the good news with which we have been entrusted.

To be a steward is to be entrusted with something that belongs to someone else. As Christians, as persons called to live under and in the name of Christ, we have been entrusted with the good news that God loves creation so much that God became flesh in Jesus Christ, lived and died for our sins and for our sinful nature, and was raised from the dead so that the bonds of sin are broken and we might have new life. As the Church is called the Body of Christ, we are to live as the embodiment of this gospel. As the family of God, as the Body of Christ, we have also been entrusted with one another – to teach, to care for, to lovingly rebuke, to heal, to draw back into the fold, to hear when another reaches out to us, and to allow others to do the same for and to us. We are called to know ourselves entrusted to others, so that we do not consider ourselves above others, nor beneath others, but rather beside one another in the name and love of Christ. This is not easy to do, as the disciples found out.

Consider where today's story is found. The whole 9th chapter of Mark is a lesson on pride and control. It begins with Jesus' proclamation that there are those standing among them who will not taste death before the Kingdom of God arrives. This is followed by the Transfiguration, then a discussion about the coming of Elijah which Jesus follows with a foretelling of the *sufferings* to come of the Son of Man. Triumph and foreboding. Assumptions of power in the minds of the disciples; recognition of rejection in the heart of Jesus. Next comes the event of the disciples trying unsuccessfully to heal a boy possessed by demons. Jesus casts out the demon – a powerful triumph -, but he then repeats his prediction of his suffering and death. Perhaps responding to this with nervous chatter – who would mourn the most or who would succeed Jesus - , the disciples are then caught out in an argument about who is the greatest among *them*. Jesus tells them the last shall be first and then puts a child in the midst of them and declares that whoever welcomes even the lowly child in his name, welcomes Jesus himself. This is the lead in to our story.

As Stanley Hauerwas comments, it is ironic that the disciples so quickly judge the outsider exorcist for doing what they could *not* do – casting out demons in the name of Christ. (Hauerwas, “Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community”, *The Christian Century*, October 1, 1991, pp. 881-884) The disciples also quickly do *not* do what Jesus has just told them to do – they do not welcome. They are irate because the man casting out demons in Jesus' name is “not following us.” Jesus remind them that it is not “them” people need to follow. “no one who does a deed of power in *my name* will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For 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.”

We have been entrusted to one another, not by our own virtue, but because we all bear the name of Jesus Christ. We have been entrusted to one another, to share in the work of Jesus Christ, the ministry of proclaiming God's grace and righteousness. The life-giving cup of water with which our purpose is refreshed must be offered in that name and in that love, not in any self-righteous attitude. Nevertheless, it *must* be offered. We cannot let pride or desire for control or fear keep us from reaching out to one another. Letting go of our fears, of our pride, of our sense of control will not be easy because such attitudes are as integral to our sinful nature as are our arms and legs to our bodies. This is what Jesus is saying in that very difficult paragraph that follows his chastisement of the disciples.

Jesus says, ‘If you are looking for something to exclude, look to yourselves. If anything – even a arm or foot or eye – offends you, chop it off!’ The Greek word for offends, directly translates “scandalizes” - puts you off, makes you turn aside from the task ahead of you. Wisely, few have taken this passage literally. Ronald Goetz explains why in his article, “The Costliness of Grace.” (Goetz, “The Costliness of Grace”, *The Christian Century*, Feb. 5-12, 1986, p. 111) Goetz declares, “To be sure, the hand chopping, eye-plucking remedy for sin could never work, if for no other reason than the fact that we have more sins than we have bodily parts. If all offending parts were removed, in the end we would simply be torsos supporting heads. And there's the rub. Our hearts and minds are still intact. Yet from our hearts and minds come forth all our sins. Our other organs would have been made scapegoats for the real culprits.”

This gory if somewhat humorous image makes it clear to us that Jesus is not giving us a relatively easy way out of sin (chop off the physical). Jesus is telling us that what we are offered in Christ, is more important than our individual selves, than our pride, our ambition, our understanding. *We need* to be together, as a community of faith, as a Body of Christ, in wholeness through the Holy Spirit – all else can be lopped off as unessential.

Over two decades ago I visited a member of the church I was then serving. Although he had once been an active member of the congregation, and his wife was still very active, this man had not participated in the life of the church for many years. The first time I visited him, one of the first things he said to me was, “You are not going to get me back in the church. Others have tried. They couldn’t do it. Neither can you.” I smiled and told him that was okay. I was just there to get to know him. We talked for a while, during which time he told me – I hadn’t asked – why he wouldn’t come to the church. Years before he had been disillusioned by the actions of the church – they had been less than loving, less than welcoming - though not outright rejecting – not of him but of others who might want to come to the church. He had concluded that he “didn’t need the church.”

I responded that he might be right. He might *not* need the Church. But had he considered that the Church might need *him*?

I’d like to say that within a short time this man was back in the congregation. That would not be true. It took several surgeries, some life-threatening events, and a lot of pastoral care. However, he did come back. He had learned that he did, in fact, need – not necessarily me or the Church, but he needed the presence of Christ which the Church at its best represents in physical form. And he came to see that he was needed, that his own special gifts and special voice of welcome that God had given him were very much needed by the Church.

We need to reach out to those whom God has entrusted us because God has also entrusted us to them. We need to reach out to them not because without them we cannot make budget, nor because the committees cannot do their work without all hands on deck – true as both those statements might be. We need to reach out to tell them that without them, without each other, we are less than the Body of Christ we are called to be. We need to remind them – and ourselves – that without concern for each other we are less than the love of Christ which has been graciously offered to all of us. We need them in their weakness because we will need their strength in ours. We need to lop off anything that comes between us, anything that comes between the community and its focus on Christ.

To admit that the tie between us is stronger than our individual lives, purposes or goals is harder for us to do than cutting off personal sins and breaking personal habits – hard as that may be to do. With personal sins and habits we might still maintain the illusion of control.

In community it is clearly the salt of God – the presence of Christ – that enables us to do what we are called to do and be. We have been salted with fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit. And it is this salt which calls us into community – the Body of Christ, in whose name we live and have our being, and preserves us in community even with our various weaknesses and faults. We must hold on to this salt, to Christ, – and live together in the peace which only God can give.

Brothers and sisters *in Christ*, we are entrusted with the Gospel, we are called to live as a community of faith entrusted with revealing to the world what this good news of Jesus Christ looks like. Let us reveal Christ to the world.

Are any among us suffering? We should pray. Are any cheerful? We should sing songs of praise. Are any among us sick? We should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over us, anointing

us with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise us up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore let us confess our sins to one another, and pray for one another. If anyone wanders from the truth, let us bring that one back. If *we* wander from the truth, let us be called back by those who are concerned enough to reach out in the *love of Christ*.

Brothers and Sisters, we have been entrusted, made stewards of the name of Christ. What God in grace has entrusted to us, let us in humility profess through our life together.