

Eighteen Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
26 September 2021

Mark 9:38-50

Sometimes I love replacing the lyrics of famous songs with my own words. Do you remember the chorus to Pink Floyd's *Another Brick on the Wall*? It goes like this: *"We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control. No dark sarcasm in the classroom. Teachers leave them kids alone. Hey! Teachers! Leave them kids alone! All in all it's just another brick in the wall. All in all you're just another brick in the wall."* Sometimes I wonder how it would sound if we replaced the word "Teachers" with the word "Preachers?" Let's give it a go: *"We don't need no indoctrination. We don't need no faith control. No dark guilting in the pulpit. Preachers leave them kids alone. Hey! Preachers! Leave them kids alone!"* When you read Mark 9:38-50 and compare it Numbers 11 (4-6, 10-16, 24-29,) you understand my desire to change this chorus.

When will the disciples finally understand Jesus? In the text for last week, Jesus finished his instructions to his disciples by saying, "Anyone who welcomes one of the least of my people welcomes me, and the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). But in the very next sentence (Mark 9:38), John comes to him and complains that someone is doing great acts of power in Jesus' name, and they tried to stop him because "he was not following us." (Of course, you remember Joshua saying, "Lord, Moses, stop them!" when he receives a report that 2 elders were prophesying away from the Tent of Meeting.) Didn't Jesus just finish saying "accept and welcome others"? Using a small child as an example, didn't Jesus ask his disciples to welcome all: the stranger, the poor, the isolated, the ones in need of Jesus? Yet the disciples do not act in hospitality. They did not welcome the man or bring him to Jesus to facilitate a meeting of the two.

They did not even enquire if the man may have met Jesus at some point in his life, and in fact was a disciple of his. We know that Jesus had disciples who came to him at night (John 3:1-3.) They simply looked at him, assumed that he was not one of them, and immediately proceeded to dismiss him as someone who did not belong to their group. It is interesting that the phrase says, *"he was not following us"* (Italics for emphasis.) "Us," the church, the particular group of the 12 or the 120, the known orthodoxy of the day. The conflict here is not between the one doing the acts of power "in Jesus name" and Jesus. The conflict is between this man and the Church.

Less we become too judgmental of the Apostles, let me share with you a personal story I have written about in other sermons and blog posts. As many of you know, my nephew Juan almost lost his life in Iraq the day before the execution of Saddam Hussein, in 2006. Juan was flown to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. because he had lost both legs, was on life support, and needed a number of surgeries. His prognosis was so poor, that the entire family was called to Washington to be with him.

One of the first things I did at Walter Reed was to meet with the chaplain on the floor, an Episcopal Priest, originally from the Diocese of Chicago. As we sat and talked about Juan, our jobs, our Dioceses, our Bishops, and theology in general, I began to suspect that this man was, “Everything that is wrong with the Episcopal Church.” His theology was extremely different from mine; his theological heroes were the same people I considered misguided and heretical; his personal convictions were individualistic and self-serving; his lifestyle choices were in opposite contrast to mine; and lastly, his office annoyed me to no end. It looked like it belonged in a “Southern Living Catalogue” rather than a military hospital. It smelled of flowers, candles and potpourri at the same time. In short, it looked out of place for a military hospital filled with anguish and pain. Within a few minutes, I came up with the conclusion that this man was not one of us.

While I was busy avoiding the chaplain, he was busy caring for my nephew, his pregnant wife, his mother, and his father. He spent the first 25 minutes of his day by Juan’s side, holding his hand and praying for him. He spent hours comforting and supporting Juan’s wife, obtaining needed services for her. In his limited Spanish he befriended my sister in law and my brother, and soon became a confidant to them. And many months later, when Juan finally woke up from his coma, he told me he remembered the chaplain’s voice praying for him. He didn’t remember my voice or his wife’s or mother’s voices, but he remembered the chaplain’s voice. The man I dismissed as not one of “us” had been doing mighty acts of power in Jesus’ name. He was the face of Christ at a time of great tragedy. God had used him in powerful ways to be an instrument of his grace at a place filled with pain, suffering, and loss. This man may not have been one of “us,” but he was one of “his.” This is the point Jesus has been trying to make all along to his disciples. Those we are so ready to dismiss are his, as much as we are his.

Jesus looks at John today and says, “Do not stop him... whoever is not against us is for us.” No one who does anything in the name of Jesus can consider himself his enemy. In fact, Jesus warns the disciples that anyone who puts stumbling blocks on anyone else’s faith in him, it would be better for that person to wear a great millstone around his neck and to be thrown into the sea. Ours is not the job to judge who belongs and who does not belong to Jesus. Ours is not the job to separate the wheat from the tares, the good fish from the bad fish, or the spiritually pure from the spiritually impure. Ours is not the job to build walls of separation between ourselves and other Christians. I once read that every time we build walls of separation between us and others, Jesus is always found on the other side. We know this because he spent his earthly ministry on the other side, on the side of the impure, the prostitute, the tax collector, the outcast, and those considered by others to be worthless.

As a church, we must know what we preach, and we must strive to have nexus between our faith and our life. But perhaps most importantly, we must be tolerant of those who don’t feel or don’t believe what we do. We must do what we can to be welcoming, inviting, hospitable and engaging. We must remain respectful of other people, even when we don’t agree with them. Jesus often uses those we are too willing to

dismiss as instruments of great blessing in people's lives, even in ours, if we let them. The truth my friends is that I have never met anyone who brought someone to Christ by beating him over his head with the Bible. It is not judgement and condemnation that brings others to Christ, but relationships based on acceptance, love, and compassion.

The other option is to continue our indoctrination tactics, aimed at increasing fear of damnation, and filled with practices that stifle people's faith and aim to control their behaviors. We will then become the moral police of Houston. We can choose to be defenders of our version of the faith and soldiers of our version of the Christ. We can go around the city pointing the finger and telling other Christians everything that is wrong with their faith and with their lifestyle. We can become the voice of righteousness.

But if we do this, we must do it all the way. We must carry our BCP on the left hand and our chainsaw on the right hand. And we must start the chopping with ourselves. Imagine that you are driving around town, looking for other Christians to put in their place, and someone crosses you in traffic. You don't know why, but you raise your hand and show that person a particular finger. Well, as soon as you do this, please stop, park on the side of the road, take your chainsaw, and cut that finger off and throw it out of the window. And a bit further on, when your left hand causes you to stumble, then please stop immediately, wherever you are, take the chainsaw and cut it off. And a little later on, when you see one of those beautiful tourists from California and you lust after her, please reach into your left-eye socket and pull your eye out. And if you should happen to engage in an adulterous relationship with the woman, please get your chain-saw and cut.... Well, you get my drift. In fact, we all should do the same to our tongue when we gossip against our neighbor and to our brains when our thinking becomes filled with vengeful thoughts. If we choose to be the builders of great walls of separation between us and "them," we better start sharpening our blades, because we either go all the way, or we don't go at all.

The truth of the Gospel today is that all of us have fallen, all of us have stumbled, and death is the only solution to the problem. We all have to die to anything that impedes our relationship with Christ. But this death is primarily a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual death, and not just a physical death. The death Jesus is talking about is a death to sinful motivations, self-righteous beliefs that we are better than other people, our tendency to judge others, and the evil intentions in our hearts. And how do we achieve this death? We join him at the cross! We bring our sins and deposit them at the foot of that cross. We die with him that we may rise with him, as Paul would say. We ask him to come into our hearts to do the radical surgery and "cutting" that our hearts need. He is the only one who can do it. This part of the job is not up to us to do!

I went into that hospital, so many years ago, thinking that flamboyant chaplain was exactly what was wrong with the Episcopal Church. I left that hospital knowing that I was what was wrong with the Episcopal Church. Let us ask God today to give us the ability to accept others as they are and not to be too quick to dismiss those we don't see as one of "us." Let us ask him to give us the radical hospitality he expects of Christ's disciples. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen!