Sermon 09-30-18

A Follower Who Doesn’t Follow

Mark 9:38-50

**Sermon Starter**

For as long as you or I have been attending church, from way back when in our childhood until now, we have probably heard the same message in one form or another. I don’t care if we have been in a **GRAPHIC: Sunday school class**, **GRAPHIC: traditional worship service**, one with **GRAPHIC: rock bands, loud music, and mind-numbing strobe lights, GRAPHIC: or a service of meditation and contemplation,** it all boils down to the same thing. How do we figure out our part in God’s will? What should we do? How do we follow Jesus? **GRAPHIC: How do we serve as the church?**

Most of us agree that Jesus has done his part. Jesus died on the cross in obedience to God’s will. In a way we can’t fully explain, the influence of that death spread up to the very cosmos, making a difference in the power of evil. Jesus gave his life as **GRAPHIC: “a ransom for many.”[[1]](#footnote-1)** Even if we cannot explain that part, we can accept it and celebrate it. Because Jesus did that part for us, we don’t really have to understand it fully. We push ourselves to understand it more deeply, but we can just accept the salvation Jesus offers even if we trip up trying to understand it completely. We know that we should respond to Jesus’ actions on our behalf, but *how* should we respond? What should we do?

Asking that question causes much of the conflict and turmoil in the church. How should we live our lives in the world in response to Jesus and what Jesus did? That question, the subject we call Christian ethics, causes much of our trouble. We can stand in awe and gratitude at the cross. We can celebrate in joy at the empty tomb. But when we try to live out our faith and become the church, we stumble around and argue with each other. Certainly, we have trouble finding the strength to do what we *know* to do, but we also often *search* to know what to do. We can hardly pick a topic in regard to living our life in response to Jesus’ actions that doesn’t cause controversy.

**The outsider**

In trying to learn how to live our Christian response, we turn to scripture to seek its guidance. The dialogue between Jesus and the disciples in today’s gospel reading strikes us as powerful and heavy. A passage this intense must have something important for us to read. We have to claw our way through a number of problems before we reach the insights, however.

Jesus holds the mysterious exorcist up as a kind of example for us, but Mark hides him in the shadows. The exorcist himself never appears on stage. He strikes us a little like Jabba the Hutt in the original *Star Wars* movie, before the remake.

In the original, we hear about Jabba, but he never appears on screen. **GRAPHIC: We don’t see Jabba, the overstuffed worm look-a-like, until the sequel.**  We experience the exorcist the same way in this dialogue. Jesus and the disciples talk about him, but he himself never appears. We know that he casts out demons in Jesus’ name, but we know little else about him.

In typical Mark fashion, we aren’t given much information. We do not know his motivation. He might have simply sought attention. On the other hand, he might have understood that Jesus carried real power. He might have hated the demons and the damage they did to people. He might have led a good life, caring about the hurt that people endured under the demons and unclean spirits.

He obviously knew something about Jesus and understood that Jesus opposed the unclean spirits. We don’t know why he didn’t follow the other disciples. Some people just don’t join groups. Mark doesn’t tell us what he knew about the demands of discipleship. We know he didn’t participate with Jesus’ regular disciples, but we don’t know why.

So, let me ask you, what can we learn from this exorcist if we know so little about him? Does he give us any insight into the contemporary people who say they like Jesus, but don’t like the church? Did he belong to the same club as Mahatma Gandhi, who studied the gospels, developing an admiration for Jesus but feeling repulsed by the hypocrisy and lack of love shown by Christians? For that matter, does he give some credence to those who say they love God but don’t participate in church?

The disciples react to the man about the same way we do to those who say they feel spiritual but have nothing to do with the church. They want to stop him. Do they fear that if his attitude catches on, the whole discipleship thing will fizzle out?

Jesus responds to the disciples’ report in the gracious way we might expect. He affirms the ministry of the “lone wolf” exorcist. Indeed, Jesus always seems to take it easy on outsiders, while pushing the insiders relentlessly. **GRAPHIC: He praised the faith of the woman who just brushed against his clothes**[[2]](#footnote-2) and **GRAPHIC: the Syrophoenician woman**[[3]](#footnote-3) but rebuked the disciples **GRAPHIC: when they couldn’t cast out an unclean spirit from a boy.**[[4]](#footnote-4) But Jesus says about the exorcist, **GRAPHIC: “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.”**

We don’t know quite how far to stretch Jesus’ words into our situation. Perhaps we can say that Jesus opens the door to people who have experienced damage and abuse in the church, and so don’t find the heart for “following” but still work against such demons as poverty, hunger or torture.

Maybe it’s that Jesus offers a reward to those who lead sacrificial lives and work on behalf of others but can’t seem to get the word “Christian” out of their mouths. Maybe we should hear Jesus’ word of acceptance to such people and look for the possibility that they can get past their baggage to embrace the church and teach us more about becoming the Body of Christ. Until they do that, we simply affirm that they fight the same demons we do and rejoice in the victories they claim.

**The insiders**

After opening up the “big tent” to include the exorcist, Jesus turns his attention to the insiders, to those who have made the commitment to follow. We could not ask for more dramatic images or more attention-grabbing instruction than we receive here. **GRAPHIC: Millstones were so large that one needed a donkey to turn them.** **GRAPHIC: We would plummet to the bottom of the sea with one tied around our necks (who exactly would do the tying?).** What can we possibly make of **GRAPHIC: Jesus’ instruction to cut off our body parts if they cause us to stumble?** Does our eye really cause the stumbling? Don’t we stumble because of what our minds and souls do with what we see? Don’t our hands obey what we tell them to do from deep in our hearts?

The power and graphic nature of the image help us focus on Jesus’ teaching. As unnerving as we find these images, we know they must mean something for us, so we can’t quite turn away from them. We should not hear them as demands: Jesus can hardly mean that we must mutilate ourselves to “earn” passage into God’s coming kingdom or dominion. We might actually flip the message around.

Jesus’ stark words about hurting ourselves do not teach us about the uncompromising demands of discipleship; they teach us really about the wonder and sheer joy of the eternal life Jesus has opened for us. The dominion of God will be such a time and place of glory that losing a limb would seem inconsequential. The pain and inconvenience of losing an eye, foot or hand will seem trivial compared to what awaits us in eternal life. This passage certainly does not give us exact instructions. It gives us unforgettable images that cause us to reflect on what we really value.

Jesus’ affirming words about the exorcist remind us of the grace that opens the door for us into the kingdom of God. **GRAPHIC: Even the smallest act on our part — a cup of cold water — qualifies us for inclusion on Jesus’ side**. We respond by pursuing the values of the kingdom with passion. That passion does not cause us to devalue ourselves or our bodies. Nevertheless, that passion causes us to focus on the joy of eternal life that outweighs the sacrifices and hardships of a life of discipleship.

Part of that pursuit of the values of the kingdom includes **GRAPHIC: opposition to the contemporary forms of “unclean spirits.”** We never do all of the discipleship part correctly. Yet if we decide clearly that we will fight against the unclean spirits, we become part of the “in group.” Most of us need church to sustain us in the fight and to nurture our spirits. **GRAPHIC: When we take on the unclean spirits and demons of hate, violence, racism, greed and abuse of power, we should expect resistance.**

Let us celebrate what Jesus has done for us in giving his life as a ransom for us. Let us also pursue with abandon the values of the kingdom. Let us fight the demons in our way, supporting each other in the church, and even supporting those who, for right now, stand outside the church.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, 09-30-2018

Mark 9:38-50

 John 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 afterwards 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, 48where 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.’

1. Mark 10:45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 5:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark 7:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark 9:19.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)