

“Do Not Stop Him” – Mk 9:38-50 – Sept 30/12

Wow! What a text from Mark’s gospel, eh?! Filled with some of the harshest language that Jesus used – gory stuff: images of self-mutilation, chopping off one’s own hands and feet, gouging out one’s own eye, and self-propelling yourself into the Kingdom of God with the help of a large anchor around your neck – this is a really tough rant! How can we make any sense out of this? Surely we can’t be expected to take these instructions literally, or there wouldn’t be a congregation anywhere that didn’t look like a Halloween party! What on earth could have triggered such a series of harsh and unforgiving commands?

I suspect what triggered this outburst from Jesus was the harsh and unforgiving attitude from the disciples. “Teacher”, John whines, “we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Can’t you just hear it? Doesn’t it sound just like that goody-goody kid in your Grade 7 Class who ratted you out for some indiscretion? I suspect John expected Jesus would rise up in righteous indignation, and shut down this outsider who wouldn’t obey the disciples. It would seem that John expected at least a pat on the back, or a chorus of “atta boy’s.” Self-righteous cliques are quick to congratulate each other for their righteousness. But when the disciples expected Jesus to join in that chorus, they were sorely mistaken. Driving someone out of the faith because they are different, or not part of the power group, was definitely not what Jesus had in mind, and he was quick to tell the disciples to stop it. “Do not stop him”, Jesus tells his disciples, and there is a word of grace.

Even in the harsh and gory reaction from Jesus we can see more grace. “Whoever is not against us is for us”, Jesus declared, in a statement that is certainly among those statements that have been twisted by secular society and even corrupted by the church. Nowadays much of the church and the secular world as well has turned this declaration from Jesus into its opposite. Words of rejection and exclusion flared up in the church in Mark’s day, as people of faith tried to sort out who could be called faithful and who could not. Words of rejection and exclusion still run like an unbroken crimson thread of condemnation woven through the history of the church. John’s words of long ago, “We tried to stop him” are echoed even today by the calls of “we don’t want them here” as sadly people of faith, like John, declare their faith in terms of rejection and exclusion instead of welcome and acceptance. “Whoever is not with us is against us” President Bush declared righteously, and an entire nation echoed “amen!”. “Whoever does not worship the way we do is not a Christian”, pastors and parishioners alike proclaim with sinful pride, and entire congregations echo “amen!”

You’ve seen examples of this, I’m sure. Do you recall a series of TV commercials run a few years ago by a church in Vancouver – a young man dressed to look like a 50’s rocker in a tuxedo, complete with dark glasses, sits up in a coffin and a deep, profound, bass voiceover says, “all dressed up and no place to go”, a clear intimation that if you’re not one of them you’re not getting into heaven. I can imagine the members of the church who put it on the air rubbing their hands in righteous glee that “we really told them this time!” Sadly, while ads like that may attract a few more people just like them to attend their church I believe those kinds of ads also offend and drive away countless people, and I can’t help hearing Jesus’ voice in behind, saying, “if any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me...”

But here in a typical proclamation of grace, and with his classic, “you say ..., but I say” challenge to the world, Jesus turns the popular banner cry of rejection backwards, opening the doors to the kingdom way wider than the righteous on earth would allow. “Whoever is not against us is for us” Jesus declares. The world says, “we’ll only take those who clearly vote ‘yes’” ... Jesus says, “We’ll take them all”.

This is not just a trivial difference in language, either. Redefining the world's tendency to reject others (whoever is not for us is against us) into the kingdom's call to kindness and acceptance (whoever is not against us is for us) is no easy task. People fall so easily into rejecting other people, and nowhere is this more true than in the church. I don't know why this is so; I suspect it is based on fear and a highly-masked failure to believe in their own salvation: an "if I'm barely acceptable, how can you be acceptable?" kind of thing. And curiously, just as it was a close disciple who whined about someone outside their group proclaiming the good news of Christ, it seems that those who the most loudly and proudly declare themselves to be the closest to Jesus are the very ones who complain about and reject others who also proclaim the good news of God's mercy in Christ Jesus. Such "holy rejectors" need a serious jolt to hear how Jesus calls all to inviting not rejecting.

And Jesus provides that jolt. Lest John miss his point, or the rest of the disciples fail to grasp, or the early church misunderstand, or even us today ignore just how serious he is about this subject, Jesus states with great power and clarity the dangers involved in driving away those who are as yet undecided. Not unlike a parent chastising a child who has wandered into serious danger, Jesus dumps on any of his followers who would reject others, who would place themselves and their immortal souls in danger through causing even "one of these little ones who believe in me" to stumble, to fall, to turn away.

But there's even another surprise in this text. Just as a parent rebukes a child with a harsh "what could you possibly have been thinking?!" and yet finishes up with a loving hug, so too Jesus concludes these incredibly harsh words of warning with an embrace in the closing words, "be at peace with one another". For that's the bottom line here. Jesus' closing words, which at first seem so unusual, so innocuous, provide the foundation for his urgent and passionate commands to his disciples, and to us.

"Be at peace with one another", Jesus concludes. This is not a new theme for him. Not a different theme from him, but one more way in which he calls us to kindness, to compassion, to acceptance and service. "Love God with all that you are", yes, but we mustn't forget the second part of the same command, "love one another as you are loved." "I have come not to condemn the world", Jesus declares, and if he didn't come to condemn, how on earth could we assume that it's now our task?! This is not a clarion call to love only those who are insiders, to love only those who are deemed part of the true and faithful. This is a call from Jesus to accept others. "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." With an act of kindness from one outside the group of the clearly righteous, an act as simple, as neutral as a cup of water, the reward is sealed for all time for that outsider as well. How much faith does it take to obtain the reward? A simple act of kindness toward one who bears the name of Christ. Jesus is not describing a falling down writhing in proclamation, nor even crawling through the hoops or over the stumbling blocks erected by people of faith. Instead Jesus declares a simple, humane act of kindness toward one called Christian is enough to secure for all time the reward.

Those who would claim to bear the name of Christ might thus be tempted to think how much more secure is the reward for themselves, but Christ is quick to remind them and us it's not about their reward, but rather about their obligation, their responsibility to prevent a fragile newcomer to the faith from stumbling, from falling, from being turned away. That's why Jesus' harsh words follow so closely upon the call to kindness, harsh words tempered and concluded with a call to peace.

That's the bottom line, Jesus' closing comment on the subject: "be at peace with one another." We cannot be at peace with each other until all can hear the powerful call to kindness and acceptance in this passage. The world cannot know peace until the church knows peace, until instead of the "I'm right, you're wrong" fights that we enjoy are replaced by simple acts of mercy in Christ's name. The world cannot begin to experience peace until the contests over drilling wells for profitable oil are displaced by offers to drill wells to provide free water for those who are dying of thirst. Nations who struggle with obesity cannot hope for peace as long as seed is still needed elsewhere to jump-start recovery from starvation. Peace begins with sandwiches that help someone make it through the night to what might be the day their demons disappear. Peace in the kingdom begins with breakfast that keeps the hunger pangs at bay until the cheque comes in. Peace in the soul comes from a kind word that might be the one word that's required to break a cycle of depression and despair. Peace in the kingdom comes from an invitation to enter the kingdom and find rest for a weary soul, instead of one more impossible hurdle to overcome.

Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever reaches out with one tiny act of compassion in Christ's name will by no means lose the reward. If that's not a call to kindness, to compassion and to acceptance of others, then God help us to hear one.