

## **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 26, 2021**

### **James 5:13-20 and Mark 9:38-50**

Why is it so hard to change our minds? Particularly when it comes to something we closely associate with our identity? With who we are? Even when presented by trusted people with incontrovertible fact, it's just so hard.

Well, let me ask you this, raise your hand if you enjoy being wrong. Most of us dislike being wrong. That's at least part of the reason it is so hard to change our mind, especially when it comes to issues that feel like they have (and actually may have) great cost for us if we change our mind.

Unfortunately, the way our brains are wired tends to make us irrational when it comes to the core beliefs we have about ourselves and the way the world works. That irrationality may see a simple change of facts as an attack on ourselves- so we react the same way we would if someone threw a physical punch at us. It's just the way we're built.

When it comes to life and death issues, the refusal to admit we were wrong/change our minds can be a self-defense mechanism, buffering us from accepting the reality that our wrong beliefs actually hurt or killed ourselves or someone else.

It takes awareness of these tendencies, a strong sense of self, and a supportive community for most folks to make those kinds of mental changes.

John boasts to Jesus, "We saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him from doing that, because he was not following us."

I think that last word, us, is key to what is going on here and to Jesus' response. John's concern is that these people are not following "us". That they aren't hanging with the right crew. It would be a bit like us trying to stop First Presbyterian because they weren't following us Lutherans (who obviously have this whole Gospel thing perfectly correct).

Jesus' response is to chide them a bit, "Don't try and hinder them. If they do a deed of power in my name, they can't speak evil of me afterwards." Note what both Jesus and John acknowledge, that they are casting out demons and that it is done in the name of Jesus. So, what they are doing is effective and based on the power of Jesus, not themselves. What Jesus points out is just because they don't follow you does not mean they aren't following me. Just because they aren't following the same path as you, doesn't mean God isn't active in them and what they do.

Our human nature can cause us to fall into this false belief that says only the things done by us, within the context of this congregation, are those blessed by God. Maybe we expand that to our denomination. In other words, only we have a corner on the Truth. It feels good to be that special, doesn't it? But, what this does is place a limit on God and God's ability to act, "God can only act in this way, through people we approve." We just read the two creation stories in Genesis with the Bridge participants this week and I can tell you that there no limits to the power of the God who creates just by speaking.

I participated in the Fall Leadership Conference this past Monday and Tuesday with rostered leaders from all three Iowa synods. One of our speakers was a professor whose work focused on the Book of Acts. One of the things he pointed

out was that if you paid attention, throughout Acts, you found evidence that God was already at work in places long before any of the disciples got there. What he suggested is that part of our calling as Christians is to go out into the world looking for the places God is already at work and to name that. To not assume that we control where God goes and what God does, but to be open to see where others are following Jesus, even if they don't fully recognize it themselves.

This is what Jesus is pushing John and the other disciples to consider in his response. To be open to the fact that while they know God is working in and through them and their ministry, it doesn't mean that God is not also working through other people in other places.

Having made this point, Jesus moves from this gentle chiding, "Don't try and get in their way" to something more drastic.

What are we to make of this passage about chopping off body parts? Is Jesus really calling for us to mutilate ourselves? Of course not. Rather, I think this is one of those moments where Jesus is engaging in some hyperbole to get his audiences attention.

If anything causes you to stumble, literally the language talks about something tripping you up, ensnaring you so you can't move. If it keeps you from following Jesus on the way, no matter how important or vital it might seem to you, cut it off, Jesus says. Separate it from yourself, because it is better to lose this seemingly essential thing and enter into the fuller life we can find in Jesus than it is to keep it and lose that life. Indeed, as Jesus says in chapter 8, what can you give in return for your life? What is really more important than LIFE?

What are the things we fear, love, and trust more than God? One of those things may be our own brain and logic. Our own mistaken beliefs that we have shown don't always line up with the facts. When we avoid doing the hard work of admitting when we are wrong, when we have hurt others through our actions or beliefs, we lose our life. In this passage, Jesus says it is better to go through the pain of cutting off that false identity, of letting go of that false belief, and re-entering fellowship with Jesus. IT is better to do that than to forgo the pain and follow that other way to the destruction of ourselves.

Jesus is continuing to point out to us that following him, being his disciple is not an easy road. Remember a few weeks ago, "You want to follow me... pick up your cross... the very instrument of your death and follow me." Or last week, "You want to be the greatest? Then be the servant of everyone, wait on them and their needs, let them go first."

"You want to follow me?" Jesus says this week, "be open to seeing God's work in other people who are doing things another way. Be open to the fact that you may be wrong. Be open to the idea that following me may mean going contrary to what you think is a core part of who you are."

You want to follow me? Identify those things that need to be left behind, cut off in your life so that you might follow Jesus and do no harm to others. Things that seem essential to us but really are not as important as the life of another.

This is not easy. It will require a community of believers that is committed to the same thing. That is open to change, to seeing anew where God in Christ is calling us. It means knowing that like the disciples there will be days where we just don't get it, but that we follow anyway.

With all of these challenges, at the end of the day, here is what gives me hope. We know that if we travel with Jesus, what we can give, what we can change will be enough. Jesus rebuked his disciples, he taught them, he cajoled them, he answered their questions, but what Jesus never did was kick them out. Jesus got frustrated, especially here in the Gospel of Mark, but what Jesus didn't do was look at John and say, "That's it. Take a hike!"

This is what gives me hope. That Jesus has patience with us. Will hang with us in our imperfection. Even when that imperfection sends him to the cross. He will show us that with God, we can go through the pain that comes with loss and be resurrected into something new.

What do we do in the meantime? The author of James has a pretty good idea. We pray. We pray for our minds to be open to correction and new ideas. We pray for the wisdom to see where God is at work in the world and the courage to name that for others. We pray for forgiveness where we have tried to stop the work of God, where we have placed more importance in these things that cause us to stumble than in the love of God in Jesus Christ. We pray for the help of the Holy Spirit to come upon us and help us to live more in alignment with what God is calling us to.

We pray and we trust that the love of God in Jesus Christ is more powerful than our sin, than anything in this world. And that this, for us, will be enough.

Thanks be to God.