

Pentecost 21B
Mark 9:38-50

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This morning we are confronted with a rather disjointed reading from Mark's Gospel. There are people casting out demons in Jesus' name, which the disciples quickly dispense with. There is talk of little ones and hell and unquenchable fire and cutting off offending parts and being salty. And there are stumbling blocks. None of us need stretch our imagination very far to come up with a stumbling block or two in our own lives. But before we go too far down that road, it might help to consider that our reading comes in this long section of Mark's Gospel that has been dealing with discipleship. It is clear that Mark takes the issue of discipleship very seriously. And it is no coincidence that he addresses the issue of discipleship most thoroughly as Jesus and the disciples are making their way back toward Jerusalem...a road that will lead them ultimately to the cross.

If do as Mark suggests and we also take the issue of discipleship seriously, then we too find ourselves on this same road; trudging along with Jesus and the disciples on the journey to Jerusalem. Learning from the teacher. Dealing with demons and the downtrodden and the hungry and the little kids as we make our way. Mark makes it clear that the road of discipleship is hard enough when we are concerned with our own discipleship. But what about the responsibility we have for enabling and supporting the discipleship of the other. Because, that's what Jesus is talking about when he says. "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." Discipleship is not just about us. True to form, Jesus holds us to account for protecting the discipleship of others as well. Whether they are young and still unformed in their faith or out in the community doing ministry in the name of Jesus.

It might be hard to imagine how we get in the way of the discipleship of others. After all, don't we invest a good deal of time and energy in our children and our youth? We have dozens of adults attending bible studies and we often invite friends and neighbors to come for worship or a class or a meal. We worry about those we love who struggle with issues of faith. So how is that we throw stumbling blocks in the path of another's discipleship?

Well, in the interest of full disclosure...I will start with an example that indicts me. A few months back, while reading the Metro Lutheran newspaper, I discovered a Lutheran denomination, called the CLC, that I had never before heard of. It is based in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. As a graduate of Eau Claire Memorial High School, I was curious about this little denomination that had gone unnoticed by me in my own backyard. The website is quite complete and helpful. They have a school and a seminary and even a publishing house on their campus on Grover Road. As I read through their site to learn a little bit about who they are, I came upon this paragraph from the CLC history page:

As the ELCA is the most liberal of the Lutheran church bodies in the United States, so the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) may be regarded as the moderate, more middle-of-the-road, wing of American Lutheranism. It does not as yet go so far, for example, as the ELCA in permitting women to serve as parish pastors (although a poll of LCMS pastors reported that more than 1,000 of them had no objection to women clergy), yet [the LCMS] has changed its former position (as held by earlier leaders...) and now permits women to vote and hold office in the church. This is one illustration of the present-day attitude of the LCMS toward the inviolability of Scripture. The LCMS espouses the notion that the words of St. Paul regarding women in the church were culturally-affected and are no longer applicable in today's society. The CLC, on the other hand, holds that St. Paul, writing words which were verbally inspired and inerrant, was expressing the eternal will of God.

Clearly, you can imagine that I have some trouble with this. I have been known to be rather verbal in expressing frustration with denominations that do not affirm the full participation and leadership of women. In fact, this really chafed at me. But the here is the first line of their website: "The CLC is a confessional Lutheran church body which is dedicated to proclaiming the Good News of Christ crucified for sinners." Well. There it is. They, like we, proclaim the Good News. They do it differently. They understand the roles of pastors and men and women differently. They interpret Scripture differently. But they, like we, proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

So, then what if I were to tug on Jesus cloak and say to him: "Those folks over in Eau Claire were doing good work in your name, but I stopped them because they weren't doing it our way." What do you suppose Jesus would say? If I were lucky, Jesus would simply chastise me for stopping them, like he did his disciples. More likely, I would find myself at the bottom of the sea with a great millstone around my neck. Shall I cause them to stumble? Shall I put up road blocks to their discipleship because I disagree with them on something? Shall I let the issue of gender roles derail the proclamation of Jesus Christ as salvation for sinners?

Here is another example. I became aware recently of a church that is in a scuffle over the issue of using an old, beloved, but well worn processional cross or a new, specially designed one that was gifted by a beloved member. It is nigh on a holy war which has created a battlefield of stumbling blocks. Good people in the congregation are hurting each other. The focus of worship on Sundays has become whether or not someone has found the old cross and put it back in the sanctuary. If the old cross is there, there are people who simmer and stew in hurt and frustration and anger. If the new cross is there, there are people who simmer and stew in hurt and frustration and anger. And the Gospel is not heard. And they go home or out to lunch and talk not about the Gospel but about the battle of the crosses. And another stumbling block is thrown down.

I want to be very careful here to say that these issues are not insignificant. They are important and worthy of careful conversation and faithful discernment. But when we expend our energy fighting among ourselves about things that are not central to the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ, we risk throwing stumbling blocks in someone's path. We in the church lament the decline of the ELCA. We lament the decline of Christianity. But I gotta ask you...when the loudest voice the culture hears is what we fight about and how we hold ourselves apart from one another and not the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and raised...how can we expect anything else?

Now some would say that the most recent battles within our own denomination are different. They will say they are central to the Gospel because they are about the centrality and authority of Scripture, the word of God. But I encourage you to consider this: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America claims Jesus Christ as God's first and most important word. Here is a line from the Confession of Faith from the ELCA Constitution. "Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation." According to the ELCA constitution, the word of God is first and foremost Jesus Christ. The spoken word of God is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The written word of God is the Holy Scripture. Martin Luther summed it up best when he said that the Bible is the manger that holds the Christ Child. And it is Christ that we come to worship and that we proclaim.

What will our little ones learn from us at such a time as this? What stumbling blocks will we throw in their path of discipleship? You know, it is okay that we argue about things like ordination and crosses and even Scripture. That is nothing new. There has been variety in the church from its earliest beginnings. But in the midst of that variety we are reminded that the central and most precious confession we share is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate. Jesus must remain the center.

It is Jesus, the Word, who calls us to walk with him the long road to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus calls us daily through the waters of our baptism to the very serious business of discipleship. Discipleship that requires much of us. Discipleship requires that we deny ourselves and our bickering and jostling for position. Discipleship requires that we take up our cross. And if the cross that Jesus bore is any indication, the cross we bear will be for the sake of others, not our own. Discipleship requires that we protect the young, the vulnerable and weak and those new to faith. Discipleship requires that we keep the main thing the main thing: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the sake of the whole world.

Now, lest you be discouraged...this requirement of discipleship is issued to those closest to Jesus. This is what it means to be part of this family. Discipleship becomes our uniform, our shared ritual, our unifying theme, our anthem. While it is serious business, discipleship is not drudgery. To raise another ELCA theme, discipleship is God's work, our hands. It is honor and privilege. It is hard work and it is rewarding vocation. It is by our discipleship that the world may come to hear, or not, the resounding proclamation of Good News.

Amen.