

“Parts: Accepted and Rejected”

Mark 9:38-50

9/27/09

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The eighth chapter of Mark’s gospel is recognized as pivotal in the narrative of Jesus’ ministry. The pivotal point is the recognition and reality that Jesus is moving toward martyrdom and away from being revered and installed as a popular leader.

Jesus first predicts his own persecution at the end of chapter 8 and as he accepts his fate he becomes more concerned with the spiritual dynamics of the disciples. Mark strings together three teachings of Jesus that address the disciples’ desire and pursuit of status. Last week we heard how Jesus taught that the greatest disciple must be last and servant to all; this week we hear how Jesus teaches the community of the disciples to let go of their collective need to feel superior over others. It was as if having been denied elevated positions among themselves at the very least the disciples thought they should command some authority over unsanctioned do-gooders.

The disciples viewed themselves as the insiders, the privileged, the chosen, and in the midst of all they had been called to sacrifice, this was one trophy they did not want to relinquish.

Our gospel reading begins with John speaking to Jesus, saying: “Teacher, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

To which Jesus adamantly responds: “Do not stop him, anyone who does a miracle in my name in the next moment cannot say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name will not lose his/her reward.”

Jesus tries to make his point perfectly clear, though the disciples would like to claim some position of privilege when it comes to healing, to ministering to the needs of the vulnerable, the impoverished, the oppressed, and those who have been cast out – all acts done in Jesus’ name, which is to say in the Spirit of Christ, are welcome. According to Jesus, mercy is mercy, compassion is compassion, and love is love, even if when it comes from surprising sources and people. Jesus makes it clear that there are no special passwords, or apprenticeships, or credentials to be obtained in order to act lovingly as God would have us act. The act itself, offered with a loving heart, reveals God’s presence.

“Anyone who performs miracles in my name cannot later say they do not know me. Anyone who is not against us is with us.”

This teaching of Jesus, at first blush, seems self-evident. None of us would disagree that our Christian faith calls us to celebrate the good works of others that are done in love, whether or not they were given permission by an established group of God’s people. But Jesus feels compelled to instruct his disciples on this matter because they were exhibiting the same controlling authority as the temple leaders and Roman empire.

Jesus had an awareness of history, whereby the people who have been oppressed, when they overthrow their oppressors, become tyrannical themselves. When we feel like we have had no power over our lives, when we begin to realize the power we do have, Christ calls us to use it to break down barriers rather than to erect new ones.

While the story of Jesus' teaching the disciples that they need to celebrate the good works of people beyond their small group of followers seems clear, when it comes to applying it to our own lives, this teaching becomes more ambiguous.

We can summarize what Jesus taught in this way – If we are to have flavor, saltiness, expressing the divine within us, then we need to recognize the presence of the divine in others, celebrating and welcoming their acts of love. Jesus' caveat is that we are to remove those elements within ourselves that get in the way of our doing so.

Christ is inviting us into a strong, mature faith. Christ is inviting us to move beyond our own desires to feel secure because we hold the upper hand, to feel successful because we know others who are less successful, to feel content when we are part of a cohesive group even when others feel alone. Christ's teaching has to do with insiders and outsiders, about where God is and isn't present, about our self-righteous need to feel important. We are being invited and called, to surrender our desire for the warm fuzziness of being part of a closed group, to the spiritual rigors of celebrating the loving gifts of people we may not even know.

In the past few weeks I have felt challenge in several instances by people pointing to ways they have experienced being excluded by insider groups.

In one instance a member of our Thursday morning Bible study was reflecting on the possibility that some people might feel like an outsider coming to the Bible study because it might be cliquy. She said many in the Bible study are also members of the PEO chapters in town. PEO is a women's organization that supports women pursuing higher education. This woman said people not in PEO might feel like outsiders of the Bible study because they were not privy to, or part of PEO discussions that happen before and after the Bible study.

This seemed to me a solid reflection by this woman, especially if it can lead our Bible study group to be conscious of not excluding people through insider conversations.

A second instance that gave me pause came in the form of a young man's letter responding to an invitation to get involved with our church.

In painful and clear words the young man described how his father, a member of our church, at a difficult time in his life, tried to become part of one of our men's groups and was somehow made to feel unwelcome. This young man said he knows there are wonderful people in our church, but this experience of his father's caused him to be distrustful of our church's ability to live in the ways of Christ's teachings.

This letter saddened me, both for his father's experience and for this young man's perception of who we are together. His letter caused me to think about how we inadvertently and sometimes directly erect barriers that exclude others and causes us to forget how God calls us to live.

Whether it was Jesus talking to the disciples 2,000 years ago, or it is our congregation, city or nation today there is a need for people to balance their feelings of loyalty and security as members of a group, with God's hope that all people and creation will experience the joys of being bound together.

Loyalty is considered a virtue by most of us. Loyalty is a sign of commitment to people and groups. If we are loyal friends we stick with each other in good times and bad. Loyal friends stand up for each other even if it means that others think less of us – a friend is worth sacrificing for.

Loyalty to organizations is also a trait we try to cultivate. We want people to speak well of our church and our community. We want people to invest in organizations so they will grow, become stronger and instill in us a sense of pride.

The life that we are given is significantly about becoming attached to people we love, it is about working for things we believe in, it is about feeling part of life in meaningful ways, but it is also about doing so in ways that celebrate others experiencing these same dimensions of life, it is also about doing so in ways that do not reject or oppress others.

Loyalty to our church is good, but our loyalty is to God first, who calls us to welcome the stranger, care for the needy, embrace the brokenhearted, and forgive others and ourselves when we stumble.

Our loyalty to our church and other organizations is misplaced and distorted if its primary focus is to elevate its members above non-members, if group cohesiveness becomes more important than the wellbeing of members and non-members.

Jesus challenged his disciples to live a mature faith based not on their obtaining positions of status and security, or on being members of a chosen group that sets them apart from others, but on the gift of knowing they are loved and have all they will ever need. Christ challenges us to this same mature faith – a faith that is not threatened by the good works of others or by opening our community to serve strangers and friends in need.

Jesus said: "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?"

Our saltiness is found in our freedom to celebrate the gifts of others as well as our own.