

For & Against
Text: Mark 9:38-50
Preached: October 1, 2006
Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

“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.’ But 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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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 their reward. 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. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It’s better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And 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. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. It’s better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt 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.”

Rev. Broadbent:

When you preach from the lectionary, sometimes it’s hard to decide which text to preach on. Because sometimes you read the four or more text that are provided, and there’s just big problems with all of them.

What’s nice about preaching from the lectionary is that sometimes it forces you to preach on a text that otherwise you would not look twice at. The passage from Mark today is such an example. How many times was the word “hell” mentioned? Did you ever think that you would hear out of Karin Henriksen’s mouth, her gentle voice, the words “go to hell”?

And I’ll say a little bit more about hell in just a moment, but what I love about Mark is how funny he is. And just hearing this passage, you may not have caught it, but the beginning of this passage sees one of Jesus’ disciples. One of the ones who was just arguing about which one of them is going to be called the greatest, comes up to Jesus expecting to be praised. “Teacher, teacher, there was this guy I just saw, and he’s casting out demons in your name, and we have no idea who he is. But we asked him to stop, but he didn’t. But we asked him to stop.” Now the humor is in the fact that just about half a chapter before, the disciples themselves tried to cast out some demons. You’d think they’d be pretty good at it. I mean, they’re there with the teacher. They see how it goes. They know the formula. They have a sense of the order of the ritual and the attitude that you’re supposed to take. But the one who asked them to cast out the demon said, “I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.”

So now there is someone, whom the disciples don’t know, and he can do it. And they’re trying to put a stop to it. “He is not authorized to be exorcising in the name of our teacher.”

This raises for us the issue that was an issue in the community of Mark and is an issue for us today of what do we do with those who might bear the same name, the same Christian name, but whose exorcisms or other ministries we just cannot abide by. On this World Communion Sunday, we are keenly aware of how many different expressions of the divine there are throughout the world. Consider the myriad religions that are throughout the world, and that

October 1, 2006 Sermon (cont.)

every religion has its own forms or takes or attitudes or styles. Consider just the Christian faith and all of the different denominations and the different theologies and the different ways of worshiping and the different music and the different languages and the different cultures and so on and so on and so on.

What this passage from Mark points out to us is that a lot of times it is harder to love the one that is fairly close to us than it is to love the one that is, in fact, quite distant or quite different. It's easy for us to idealize and, I think, romanticize people of different faiths. I think of Buddhism in particular. Buddhism has a lot of what we could call "social capital," especially among college students. "Well, I'm a Buddhist." "Cool, right on." There's something cool about being Buddhist. And it's not an accident, because a lot of Buddhists, and I think Buddhism leads to a practicing of what is being professed, because it is practice.

Have you ever found yourself thinking, "You know, that Buddhist is acting a lot more Christian than many Christians I know. That is the same issue that is happening within the community of the gospel of Mark. Not necessarily at Jesus' time. But remember, the gospels are addressing issues in the time that the gospels are written, decades after Jesus died and was raised. The issue was that the community was growing. The communities were growing. There now are multiple communities. There were enough of them that they would come across each other and realize, "Ah, I don't know you, but we're talking enough of the same language that I know we're practicing the same thing. But I don't know you. Are you properly authorized to be doing this?"

It was the same issue. It was an issue of the church growing. Within our own congregation we understand ourselves to be a church that is in a time of growth. And I hear from many of you, and I have the thought myself of, now, I don't quite know everyone like I used to. There was a time when I could look out and I recognized every face and could put a name with it. And now, I feel a little bit like a stranger in my own church. The faces are starting to look familiar, but I don't know, and I'm not known, in the same way that I used to be.

I think it's true that you often feel more alienated from those who are living in your own house than those who live far away. Do you ever catch yourself becoming more angry at the one that you profess to love – your spouse or family member – than all of the strangers that you meet throughout the day. You are a lot more tolerate with your acquaintances or co-workers or people that you come into contact – maybe not – than those who are living under your same roof. It's as if we love that person enough to argue with them, to take issue, to point out how things could work better.

This happens, I think, within the Christian church. And on World Communion Sunday, I think we do well to think about this. It might be our greatest growing point. We often look at other expressions of Christianity, and because it's close enough to recognize the similarities, we also recognize the great differences.

When I was in college, I led a group of fellow students to Guatemala. There were about six or seven of us, and we went to Xela [pronounced Shela], also known as Quetzaltenango. And just outside of the city we stayed in someone's home and walked about an hour each day to and another hour from our work site.

One evening we were invited to attend a church service. It was a Pentecostal church. And those of us who were from Oregon were of various backgrounds. A few of us would have called ourselves Christian. A few of us would have called ourselves spiritual, not so into the organized religion thing, but certainly spiritual, and a few folks were kind of ambivalent.

Well, I had to give a little pep talk, being the most "churchy" person, I guess. "No, they're not going to ask you to do anything to make you uncomfortable. They're not going to ask you

October 1, 2006 Sermon (cont.)

direction that you are being guided, prodded, coaxed, pleaded into, and then you don't do it. What you profess and what you practice are not inline with one another.

Now the danger of this passage is taking it literally, thinking that there is some literal place that people go where there's fire and worms eating away flesh. The point is that the movement of our spirit makes as much of a difference as the movement of our body. In fact, if our spirit doesn't move first, then our body never will move into those places where we're called to move. The greatest distance is the distance from this fixed commitment to the softening and the moving of the spirit into another direction.

Sartre said, "Hell is everyone else." I think that's also true in terms of how we interpret it. But Jesus' point, I think, is that the way that we regard the other, or the not so other, makes a difference. In fact, it may make all the difference in the world to who we are, as individuals, and who we are as the church. We're asked to serve others without prejudice. To give even a glass of water where it is needed and to be salt and light to one another and to the world.

And finally, and this is the last line of the passage that you heard today, "to be at peace with one another." Let it be so.

Amen