

9/30/18

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost Lectionary 26

GOSPEL

Mark 9:38-50

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus teaches his disciples about ministry that involves service and sacrifice. His disciples are slow to realize these words apply to them as well as to others.

³⁸John 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." ³⁹But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For 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.

⁴²If 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. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And 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. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹For everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰Salt 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."

Many of us know that when a U.S. president enters a room on a formal occasion, the song, "Hail to the Chief," is played; but not as many people know how the tradition developed. There actually several – one is that the 11th president, James K. Polk, was said to be so "physically undistinguished" that visitors to the White House often didn't notice when he'd entered a room. To make sure they knew Polk was there, his wife Sarah arranged for the Marine band to play this old Scottish anthem, which we know as "Hail to the Chief" whenever he walked through the door. It was immediately adopted as a tradition, and all presidents have honored it since. This tradition began as a way of making sure that people knew who was in the room. It is about influence. Sometimes, we too, want to make sure that others know who is in the room. Even, sometimes we want to make sure that others know that we, ourselves, are in the room. The bottom line has to do with our affect on those in our arena. When we are in charge of something or trying to make an impression on someone, we want to be certain that attention is paid properly so that we can exert the influence that we want. All of us know that influence is a strong factor in our lives from things like voting issues down to what brand of cereal we pick at the local grocery store.

This morning in our Gospel text from Mark, we recall the account of the disciples of Jesus coming upon someone who, in the opinion of the disciples, was not a part of their group. What struck the disciples about this man was that he was doing something in the name of Christ without really being a part of Jesus' following. The disciples' first reaction was that this was wrong, so they impulsively began to stop the man. They were worried about what affect this person may have on other people, or perhaps more directly what impact it could have on those who were of the following of

Jesus. They were worried about the influence that this person could have on people. So, when they return to Jesus they immediately begin to tell him about the situation they had encountered. But what surprises these well-intended disciples is Jesus' reaction. He does not pat them on the back and say good job, instead he basically says, there is nothing wrong with what the man was doing. He was fine. He then goes on to say: "Whoever is not against us is for us." The reality that Jesus points to is that this will help their cause. The man is increasing the influence of the life of Jesus to those around them. This, according to Jesus, then actually contributes to people coming to understand and hear what the message of the Kingdom of God is all about.

It was difficult for the disciples, and perhaps today for us, to completely comprehend this thinking. So often we operate under the guise that unless something or someone is on "our team" then they are not really a part of what we stand for. This is especially challenging when it comes to the topic of religion and faith practices. However, the bottom-line is that each of us, whether we choose to recognize it or not, do indicate a particular standpoint or view on many subjects, and whether we want to realize it or not, we also indicate that position in the particular way we carry out our faith journeys. Every person in this room influences other individuals in the direction their faith walk will take. We may think that if we don't say anything we are not doing anything. This position does not hold water. The reality is that each of us, by our presence, by our choices, by our daily living, and by our actions, indicates the role that the Christian faith has played out in our lives. We simply cannot escape that fact that we do send messages with our lives. Some of those messages we choose to demonstrate, others we may not want to show, but nonetheless still

communicate to those around us. As you look at your own life, what do you guess that others believe about Christianity based on your daily living?

An author writes about a man he calls Hank. Hank was a cranky guy. He did not smile easily, and when he did smile it had a cruel edge to it, because it came at somebody else's expense. He had a knack for discovering islands of bad news in oceans of happiness. He would always find a cloud where others saw a silver lining. Hank rarely affirmed anyone. His native tongue was complaint. He carried judgment and disapproval the way a prisoner carries a ball and chain. Although he went to church his whole life, he was never unshackled. The writer tells the story that occasionally Hank's joylessness produced unintended joy for others. There was a period of time when his primary complaints centered around the music in the church. "It's too loud," he would protest to the staff, the ushers, and eventually to visitors. The author says that they finally had to take Hank aside and explain that complaining to complete strangers was not appropriate. A few weeks later, the church secretary buzzed the pastor on the intercom to say that an agent from OSHA – the Occupational Safety and Health Administration – was here to see him. "I'm here to check out a complaint," he said. As the pastor tried to figure out who on the staff had called OSHA about a church problem, the agent began to talk about decibel levels at airports and concerts. The pastor interrupted and asked, "Excuse me, are you sure that this was someone on our staff who called you?" "No," he explained, "If anyone calls – whether or not they work here, we're obligated to investigate." Suddenly the light dawned on the pastor, Hank had called OSHA and said, "the music at my church is too loud." By this time the rest of the church staff had gathered in the pastor's office. It became a humorous situation and they apologized to the agent. "Don't

apologize,” the agent said. “Do you realize how much ridicule I’ve faced around my office since everyone discovered I was going out to bust a church?” Hank, had provided some humor, but the painful truth below it was that Hank was not a positive influence. The pastor goes on to tell how Hank’s ways had affected his own children.

This week, many were clued to the television and radio to watch the events surrounding the supreme court nomination. Regardless of one’s position on the outcome, we recognize that how we act and how we react – impacts those around us. Those who look to serve in our government, those who have been victims of abuse, those whose character has been called into question, all of these and more take cues from our responses. How we speak and react to these things – matter.

Each of us, whether we want to realize it or not, influence those around us. Sometimes this is a scary thing. It is sometimes overwhelmingly shocking to think that others make choices based on some things we say or do. Sometimes, however, it can be a very humbling thing. For those who have grown up in the faith, think back to those people who have had an impact on your Christian life, it may be a pastor or a Sunday school teacher; it may be a mother or a father, those who can play significant roles in our faith development. But is often is also people like the next door neighbor where you grew up, it is the couple who sat two rows behind you in church, it is the roommate in college, it is the person who on the right day at the right moment simply smiled at you, touched you on the shoulder, or simply said: “hello.” It may even be someone who you were never really close to, but watched from a distance. It sometimes might even be someone for whom you made sure that you did the opposite of what they did. We all have those people in our lives, but now that reality

hits closer to home. You now, are also those people in other people's lives. We all become the ones to whom not only the young people, but also all people are shaped by. When we hear Jesus speak of being stumbling blocks, and how to cut off that which can bring others down, it can be a devastating burden to carry. But we must recall the great act of forgiveness of Jesus on the cross, and how the love of God remains unconditional no matter what we do. The burden to carry may be challenging at times. And there is no doubt that we all stumble at times, but perhaps the greatest thing we can model is that God accepts us scars, imperfections, mistakes and all. God celebrates when we point toward the journey in discipleship, and God also welcomes us with open arms, like he does the prodigal son, when we return to him. Each of us, regardless of how we act, how reserved or outspoken we may be, affect those around us. Each of us can enrich and deepen one another's affection for God and other people. Each of us can hear the words of Jesus: "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another." Amen.