

Mark 9: 38-50

I WAS IN THE 8TH GRADE WHEN I WALKED ACROSS THE STREET, ENTERED A METHODIST CHURCH AND SIGNED UP FOR CONFIRMATION CLASS...WITHOUT A CLUE WHAT I WAS DOING. THERE WAS A GIRL ABOUT MY AGE AT THE CHURCH..HER CHURCH... WHO LOOKED AT ME AND ASKED, "WHEN'S THE FLOOD?" APPARENTLY SHE THOUGHT MY PANTS WERE TOO SHORT. SHE WAS MY STUMBLING BLOCK AS I WAS IN HER CHURCH. SOON I BECAME FRIENDS WITH ANOTHER GIRL AT CHURCH AND WTH WOULD INVITE HER TO MY HOUSE AFTER CHURCH TO HANG OUT...AND I WOULD ALWAYS ASK IN FRONT OF MY STUMBLING BLOCK TO MAKE SURE SHE HEARD SHE WASN'T INCLUDED IN THE INVITATION. AND SHE WOULD DO THE SAME TO ME....WE QUICKLY BECAME EACH OTHER'S STUBMBLING BLOCKS. IT'S EASY IN LIFE TO NAME AND QUICKLY BLAME PEOPLE, EVENTS, AND CIRCUMSTANCES THAT HAVE TRIPPED US UP, INTERFERRED IN OUR LIVES, OR KEPT US FROM GETTING WHAT WE WANTED. STUMBLING BLOCKS.

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING TELLS A STORY ABOUT JOHN AND THE OTHER DISCIPLES RUNNING INTO A STUMBLING BLOCK, AN OUTSIDER WHO, AS JOHN TELLS JESUS, "WAS NOT FOLLOWING US."

JOHN DOES NOT SAY THAT THIS GUY INTERFERED WITH THE DISCIPLES' WORK, THAT HE HAD A DIFFERENT PURPOSE, OR THAT HE OPPOSED THEM. HE SIMPLY SAYS, "HE WAS NOT FOLLOWING US." NEVER MIND THAT THE GUY WAS CASTING OUT DEMONS IN JESUS NAME. HE WAS NOT ONE OF THEM, AND THAT SEEMS TO BE THEIR STUMBLING BLOCK. WHATEVER IT WAS FOR JOHN AND THE DISCIPLES, THEY FELT THREATENED BY THIS GUY. HE WAS CASTING OUT DEOMNS, ALLEVIATING OPPRESSION, OFFERNING A NEW LIFE, ALL IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

LAST WEEK THE DISCIPLES ARGUED AMONG THEMSELVES ABOUT WHO IS THE GREATEST. NOW THIS WEEK THEY ARE COMPLAINING ABOUT THIS OTHER GUY, THIS STUMBLING BLOCK TO THEIR STATUS, POWER, AND RECOGNITION. TODAY'S STORY IS A CONTINUATION OF LAST WEEK...ONE STORY TOLD OVER 2 WEEKS. JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES ARE STILL IN THE SAME HOUSE AS LAST WEEK, THE CHILD IS STILL ON JESUS' LAP, AND JESUS IS STILL DEEPENING AND MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD.

LIKE MANY WHO ARE CERTAIN OF THEIR RIGHTNESS OR RIGHTEOUSNESS, THE DISCIPLES ARE SHOCKED WHEN JESUS DOESN'T IMMEDIATELY TAKE THEIR SIDE. THEY ARE TRUSTING THEIR OWN EGOS, OR THEIR NEED TO BE RIGHT. I DON'T THINK THEY REALIZE THEY ARE STEPPING OFF THE HOLY PATH, NOT EVEN WHEN JESUS SAYS IT QUITE CLEARLY.

ONE COMMENTATOR POINTS OUT THE SHIFT IN PRONOUNS. THIS OTHER GUY IS DOING WORKS OF POWER IN *YOUR* NAME," BUT "NOT FOLLOWING *US*." APPARENTLY, IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS; YOU HAVE TO BE A CERTAIN KIND OF FOLLOWER. AND NOTICE THAT JOHN, THE DISCIPLE MAKING THE REPORT, SEEMS TO EXPECT JESUS' APPROVAL. HE IS NOT ASKING A QUESTION, "*SHOULD* WE HAVE STOPPED HIM?" BUT RATHER OFFERS AN ALMOST MATTER-OF-FACT ACCOUNT: "AND WE TRIED STOP HIM, BECAUSE HE WAS NOT FOLLOWING US."

SCHOLARS TEND TO AGREE THAT MARK IS RE-TELLING THIS SCENE FROM JESUS' MINISTRY IN ORDER TO HELP DEAL WITH SOME OF INTERNAL CONFLICTS WITH WHICH HIS OWN COMMUNITY WAS STRUGGLING. WE DON'T KNOW QUITE WHAT THE DIVIDING LINES WERE—GNOSTIC VS ORTHODOX VIEWS OF JESUS, THOSE WHO SUFFERED PERSECUTION IN JESUS NAME VS THOSE WHO ABANDONED THE FAITH AND NOW WANTED TO COME BACK, ETC.—JUST THAT THERE WERE SIGNIFICANT DIVISIONS. AND SO MARK INVITES HIS DIVERSE AND CONFLICTED PARISHIONERS INTO JESUS' STORY IN ORDER TO REFRAME HOW THEY THINK ABOUT THEIR LIVES, THEIR COMMITMENTS, THEIR IDENTITY, AND THEIR VISION OF WHAT CONSTITUTES AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

JESUS ESSENTIALLY TELLS THEM TO WORRY ABOUT THEMSELVES, NOT WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING—ESPECIALLY WHEN THOSE OTHER FOLKS ARE DOING NOTHING AGAINST JESUS. STOP EXPENDING SO MUCH ENERGY COMPARING YOURSELF TO ANYONE OTHER THAN THE PERSON GOD CREATED YOU TO BE. HOW INSECURE AND TENUOUS YOUR OWN FAITH MUST BE, IF ITS SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON YOUR DISMANTLING SOMEONE ELSE'S.

WHEN ENOUGH OF US FAIL TO BE WHO WE WERE CREATED TO BE, THE BODY OF CHRIST IS IN DANGER OF BECOMING SALTLESS SALT. AND IF WE LOSE OUR SALT, WE LOSE SO MUCH MORE THAN TIME. WE LOSE OUR PURPOSE, OUR VALUE, OUR IDENTITY AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS.

JESUS IS PRETTY CLEAR THAT WE NEED TO BE MINDING OUR OWN SPIRITUAL BUSINESS. IT'S AS IF HE'S SAYING TO JOHN, "DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT OTHER GUY. YOU WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF." HE'S ASKING US TO LOOK WITHIN. THE GREATEST STUMBLING BLOCKS ARE NOT OUTSIDE US BUT WITHIN US: ANGER AND REVENGE, THE JUDGMENTS WE MAKE OF OTHERS, OUR DESIRE TO GET AHEAD, THE NEED TO BE RIGHT, OUR UNWILLINGNESS TO LISTEN, THE ASSUMPTION WE KNOW MORE AND BETTER THAN ANOTHER, FEAR, BEING EXCLUSIONARY, OUR BUSYNESS, GOSSIP, OUR DESIRE FOR POWER AND CONTROL. THESE, AND A THOUSAND OTHER THINGS LIKE THEM, ARE WHAT CAUSE OTHERS AND US TO FALL.

WHOEVER IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US. WHY THE NEED TO TATTLE ON OTHERS WHO ARE DOING IT DIFFERENTLY? WHY RISK LOSING EVERYTHING JUST TO BE RIGHT? OUR CULTURE HAS BECOME VERY GOOD AT SAYING, "I'M NOT *THAT* KIND OF CHRISTIAN."

THERE ARE SO FEW SPACES IN OUR WORLD AND CULTURE RIGHT NOW THAT CREATE SPACE FOR GENUINE CONVERSATION WHERE EACH PERSON HEARS THE BELIEFS OF THE OTHER, FOR HEARTFELT ENGAGEMENT THAT DOESN'T END IN AN ARGUMENT. CAN THE CHURCH BE THAT KIND OF PLACE?

TODAY'S GOSPEL IS NEITHER EASY NOR COMFORTABLE. IT'S HARD. BUT IT'S WORK JESUS IS ADAMANT ABOUT. YOU CAN HEAR IT IN THE IMAGES HE USES: DROWNING BY MILLSTONE, THE AMPUTATION OF HAND OR FOOT, THE TORN OUT EYEBALL, THE UNQUENCHABLE FIRE, HELL, THE WORM THAT NEVER DIES. IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE THESE LITERALLY, YOU AT LEAST NEED TO TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY. FAITH IS HARD WORK. SO MUCH IS AT STAKE. WHAT YOU SAY AND DO, WHAT YOU FOCUS ON, WHAT YOU PRIORITIZE AS MY DISCIPLES..THESE

THINGS MATTER. SO PLEASE DON'T BE STUMBLING BLOCKS. PLEASE DON'T MAKE FAITH HARDER FOR YOURSELVES AND FOR OTHERS THAN IT ALREADY IS.

PERHAPS THIS STORY FROM MARK IS FOR HIS 21ST CENTURY DISCIPLES TO WRITE A DIFFERENT ENDING TO THE SCENE: "WE SAW SOME PEOPLE, LORD, WHO WERE _____

CASTING OUT DEMONS; WORKING FOR JUSTICE; ADVOCATING FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR JOBS AND FEEL FORGOTTEN; CARING FOR VETERANS; PROTESTING INJUSTICE; AND MORE...ALL IN YOUR NAME. THEY DO NOT FOLLOW US OR DO THINGS THE WAY WE DO IT. WE MIGHT EVEN DISAGREE WITH THEM. BUT WE DID NOT TRY TO STOP THEM, AND THEY GAVE US A CUP OF COLD WATER AND IT TASTED SO GOOD.

HOW WOULD OUR GOSPEL STORY HAVE READ IF JOHN HAD OFFERED THAT OTHER GUY A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT? PERHAPS ASKING IF HE NEEDED ANYTHING? AND TO TAKE THAT EVEN FURTHER, TO ASK OURSELVES: WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE FOR EACH OF US TO HELP THE *OTHER* PERSON SUCCEED? INSTEAD OF CALLING OUT EACH OTHER'S FAULTS; INSTEAD OF FOCUSING ONLY ON OUR OWN COMFORT AND RIGHTNESS; INSTEAD OF MAKING AN ALREADY HARD ROAD EVEN HARDER FOR OTHERS TO TRAVEL; WHAT IF WE EACH COMMITTED TO HELPING EACH OTHER? WHAT IF WE CLEARED PATHS FOR EACH OTHER? REMOVED OBSTACLES FOR EACH OTHER? WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE TO BE PATH CLEARERS? STUMBLING BLOCK REMOVERS? TO BE HEALERS IN JESUS NAME AND BEST OF ALL, NO ONE WOULD EVER LOSE THEIR WAY BECAUSE OF US.

ONE SUNDAY AFTER WORSHIP A MAN APPROACHED ME, INTRODUCED HIMSELF AND SHARED HE AND HIS FAMILY WERE RELOCATING TO BROOKINGS FROM WISCONSIN AS HE GOTTEN A JOB AT SDSU. I WELCOMED HIM AND SHARED MY EXCITEMENT IN MEETING HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN...NEVER GIVING IT ANOTHER THOUGHT. A COUPLE MONTHS WENT BY. IT WAS A COMMUNION SUNDAY AND AS THE CONGREGATION CAME FORWARD TO KNEEL AT THE COMMUNION RAILING MY ASSOCIATE AND I DISTRIBUTED THE ELEMENTS. IT WAS A LARGE SANCTUARY SO OFTEN THE FIRST TIME I WOULD SEE PEOPLE WOULD BE AT THE COMMUNION RAILING. AS I MADE MY WAY DOWN THE RAILING I GAVE THE BREAD TO THE MAN WHO HAD RECENTLY INTRODUCED HIMSELF TO ME AND IMMEDIATELY NEXT TO HIM WAS A WOMAN, WHO I ASSUMED WAS HIS WIFE. AS I SAID, 'THE BODY OF CHRIST BROKEN FOR YOU', SHE LOOKED UP FROM HER PRAYER. IT WAS HER. MY STUMBLING BLOCK FROM ALL THOSE YEARS AGO. IT WAS AT CHRIST'S TABLE, LITERALLY IN THE SHARING OF THE EUCHERIST, THAT WE SAW EACH OTHER FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE LEAVING RAPID CITY OVER 35 YEARS AGO. I CAN'T EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED THAT MORNING DURING COMMUNION. LORI AND HER HUSBAND JOINED THE CHURCH AND BECAME VERY ACTIVE. I OFTEN WONDER IF I WOULD HAVE RUN INTO HER AT WALMART FOR THE FIRST TIME WOULD THE ENCOUNTER HAVE BEEN THE SAME? I KNOW MY ANSWER. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WE ARE CALLED TO BE PATH CLEARERS AND STUMBLING BLOCK REMOVERS. WITH JESUS IT'S ALL POSSIBLE...I KNOW

