

Salted With Fire

Mark 9: 38-50

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You may have noticed we have been reading all month from the gospel according to Mark. In our worship texts we've heard the essence of the entire gospel, that God's healing power is available for everyone who puts herself on the line in order to embrace and serve those who are marginalized. Mark's gospel is about radical inclusion, about taking risks, about reaching outside yourself, beyond your comfort zone, and beyond your circles of people, and welcoming into your midst those invisible to you. For it is in these places and actions that God's power is on the loose. What more is there to say? Let's read on...

Mark 9: 38-50 (NRSV)

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.

42"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. 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. 44And 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. 45And 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, 46where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

47"For everyone will be salted with fire. 48Salt 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."

As a seminary student, I was required to attend a support group regularly. Support groups are good things, we have some here at WPC, regular gatherings of spirited and caring people on some kind of walk together. This group I attended in seminary was just like one of ours. The only differences, perhaps, were that in meetings of this particular support group, there was rarely ever a word spoken in English, and I was the only member of the group under 70, and of the 20 people in the room, I was the only person who wasn't Muslim.

I attended a support group of war refugees from Somalia, seniors, a band of upstanding and loving men – bankers, lawyers, doctors, professors, craftsmen, community leaders – who one day fled their homes running from bandit attackers in their anarchic homeland and never stopped running until they crossed the border. As refugees of war, they eventually found themselves dropped off in Atlanta as poor and invisible provisional people, with nobody but each other. I should pass along that in one of our meetings one man said in English it was easier to live in an anarchic homeland than it was to live poor, jobless, and old in America, and everyone in the room nodded his head.

In this support group, I was what you might call the "white elephant" in the room. The men knew I was from the university, but it was pretty apparent I'm not Somali, not a student of Somali language, and because of the way I dressed it was pretty clear I wasn't a devout muslim like they were. But these beautiful men always welcomed me with smiles, awkward non-verbal chit-chat, and presence – they had a way of looking me in the eye and listening to me that promised me that I matter. I went to this group of men to find ways of ministering to them, and I did come be with them, listen to them, even advocate for them, but as Mark

promised about this stuff, this getting outside yourself and your comfort zone in God's peace, the flow of ministry often boomeranged.

I befriended one bilingual man named Sufi, who after about 3 months asked me what I was studying. "I'm in divinity school," I said, being vague and evasive. "You are a pastor!!! Praise be to Allah!" he said. "Yes," I said, trying to keep it down. "Well, not yet, but I am studying to be one." "What made you do this???" "Well, I believe deeply in God, and am studying to be able to articulate my faith." "Wonderful. If anything causes you to stumble, you just cut it off." I let out a fear-laugh, having no idea what he just said. He clarified, "You know, Mark 9:43, Jesus says if anything causes you to stumble, cut it off. You said you're in seminary, right?" I didn't bother explaining that we'd study the New Testament next year, I just let him teach me. He went on to quote several other sayings of Jesus, for encouragement to me, but they didn't startle me as much as the first so I don't remember the scriptures. I was so touched by his teaching, and amazed by his knowledge of MY faith story, that I asked him if he'd like to join me for lunch. "No, thank you," he said, "I am fasting for Ramadan, you know, it is how, like Jesus did, how I draw nearer to God and stand with those in the world who are starving." "Oh wow," I repeated, first to Sufi as we left, and then to myself a hundred times on the way home. I discovered a professor about Christ in the form of a devout Muslim, a lover of Mohammed who loved and studied and knew Jesus better than I did, reminded me that following the God revealed in Jesus requires not just borrowing Jesus mantras, but living a Christ-like life.

This, I believe, was an exchange that Mark and Jesus would have enjoyed with me, the mind-expanding power of the spirit turning me inside out, the kind of God-blessed moment that leaves you just the way Mark and Jesus hope you'll be left – HAUNTED by the gospel that is more than you think.

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw a guy casting out demons in your name, helping lots of people, inspired by you, one who understands his acts of healing to be in your name, but he wasn't following us, so we tried to stop him." The painfulness of John's misunderstanding can get lost here in our single text, for in the previous chapter of Mark, the disciples cannot heal a demon-possessed man, and Jesus explains it is because they do not have faith. So they, the disciples, the insiders, the ones who have been following, can't heal, but they observe someone else out there, an outsider, healing effectively in Jesus' name and, well it's working, but it's just not right somehow.

But Mark's Jesus is here to hammer home that the gospel of God, the truth about everything, is not about membership, it is about exorcism. Jesus Christ walked the earth to heal and cast out all the ungodly things that possess you and me and our neighbors, and we are called to do the same. Ushers, we all are, of justice and wholeness and peace, and to bring this new beautiful world into view, we have to be focused on the god-powered stuff of life – outreaching, including, welcoming, embracing, and never letting go.

Whatever keeps you from living in this power, whatever keeps you from believing in the power of outreaching, including, welcoming, embracing, and being together with others, whatever keeps you from living this way, cut it off, says Jesus. If you're held back by a bad habit, change it, if it's a relationship that brings you down, end it, if it's a culture you're a part of, don't participate in it, and if it's fear of something strange and new and outside then keep your nose in the gospel according to Mark and let it persuade you to take risks for the sake of Christ's gospel love. Cast out the things holding you back from following this gospel so that you can get busy healing and being healed in the life that is Christian ministry. This is what we gather to be and do in church, in following Christ, it's EXORCISE CLASS, limbering up with gospel promises to go live in the gospel truth, that God's transformative power is out there, out there in this stuff of ministry.

By the way, healing in Jesus' name doesn't have to mean you stand over folks in the grocery line with a bottle of Aquafina shouting like Jimmy Swaggart, "you are healed!" It means that you heal according to Jesus, that you are accepting the invitation of Christ to a ministry of healing and exorcism of all the things that keep people separated from God and each other, in the name of Jesus. It's not that you go teach a kid to read and

tell him Jesus told you to do it, no you do it because by doing it you are doing what Jesus did, going to be with and love, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit that inspired his work and faith, and in the promise that the same spirit is given to you who believe in the power of the Christian life.

Do not stop this healer, this demon-caster, says Jesus, for anyone who does a deed of power in my name will not stray. Something happens to those who work for healing in my name, the deed of power they give exerts power over the giver. The exorciser becomes the exorcised.

This is how I understand Jesus' cryptic admonition, "You will be salted with fire." That which will preserve and enhance you as a child of God, is being humble with everyone, giving yourself to someone else, reaching out and accepting everyone. If we are salted by entering into this life we have been shown by Jesus, we enter into it by casting out the things that hold us back from it. Christ, and those who believe in the God in Christ, have the power to exorcise all the things that possess us differently, because we've been shown the way to peace and real power.

The gospel is not about membership it is about exorcism, about casting out the things that cause us and our brothers and sisters to stumble short of the Christian life, this is how we are made pleasing to God and made peaceful with one another. As a follower of Christ, you and I are in on this secret, you and I know the source of a great and beneficent power for our lives, and for the world, a life of ministry that is calling us, waiting for us, ready to be tapped...