

Fire Bombs From The Prince Of Peace
Mark 9:38-50
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 27, 2009

I was tempted to skip today's gospel lesson and choose another that didn't promote self-mutilation and drowning yourself as sure fire remedies for avoiding the near occasion of sin. I mean, how did this stuff make it into the New Testament? And what could possibly provoke Jesus to say these horrible things?

I'm sure right after you heard this passage read, Jesus' escalating rage surprised you, and I say "escalating" because he started off sounding calm and reasonable but the more he said, the more angry and frustrated he became.

Remember? John, the disciple, said, "Teacher we saw a stranger casting out demons in your name." Translation: "Imagine that Jesus, he stole our exclusive brand name, without our permission so he could save a man's life. We tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen and kept doing it anyway. I mean, Jesus, just who does he think he is?"

Before we parse John's report, let's put it in context. Two weeks ago the sermon was based on Mark's story of Jesus revealing himself to be the Messiah, not the long-expected, triumphant Messiah, but the unexpected Suffering Messiah, crucified for the sins of the world. Peter, you remember, speaking for the group, demanded Jesus stop scaring them with this nonsense and get back with the program. Instead, Jesus raised the stakes saying, "If you still want to follow me you must first deny yourself, and then pick up your cross before you can follow me."

Then last week, as Jesus led his disciples closer to Jerusalem and his crucifixion he overheard them arguing, "Who's the greatest in the Kingdom? In other words, "Who among us is fit to take Jesus' place if and when the time comes?"

Certainly walls were going up as the disciples distanced themselves from Jesus and each other. Can you hear them complaining? "What's gotten into Jesus lately? He's acting and talking really weird. He's not fun to be around any more!" Apparently, the closer they got to Jerusalem the more their relationship with Jesus soured. The bloom was off the rose as the disciples became increasingly distracted and self-absorbed.

All this begins to explain Jesus' mounting frustration. When John finished snitching on the renegade faith healer, Jesus calmly said, "Don't stop him... Whoever isn't against us is for us."

Next, Jesus serenely explained his decision. "Whoever gives a cup of water to drink or whoever performs a deed of kindness or act of love will be rewarded as if he or she was one of my own." Reading between the lines, Jesus is politely reminding John, "You don't have the corner on discipleship. You don't have exclusive rights to my

franchise. Contrary to what you think, John, you're not the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven!"

Then suddenly, Jesus' words became accusatory. "If any of you puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me (If any of you try to denigrate, demoralize or prevent any believer who takes his discipleship seriously), you'd be better off cutting off your hand, plucking out your eye or throwing yourself in the sea..."

Previously I interpreted this teaching about being a "little one's" stumbling block as a warning against intentionally leading newcomers to the faith down the wrong path. Then it hit me, the "little one" Jesus referred to isn't the young, impressionable neophyte, but the unknown seasoned faith healer John was upset about!

Jesus consistently reserved the terms "little ones" and "you of little faith" for people honestly struggling with their discipleship, unlike the antagonistic scribes and Pharisees Jesus called "snakes" and hypocrites. So the terms "little ones" and "you of little faith" weren't a put down but a term of endearment. Apparently, Jesus considered the outsider caught casting out demons one of his "little ones," not an adversary, but a fellow worker.

So, why did Jesus go ballistic and start the "cut off your hand and pluck out your eye" thing after John complained about the man? Again, let's put this story in context with the larger narrative.

First, immediately after Jesus affirmed Peter's declaration, "You are the Christ," and foretold his crucifixion, there was a sea change in the disciples' attitudes and behaviors towards Jesus. Right when their Master needed them most for friendship and encouragement the disciples intentionally distanced themselves both emotionally and spiritually from Jesus and each other. Give them some credit though, at least they didn't quit and go home, but neither did they totally trust Jesus' authority.

Second, the more the disciples questioned Jesus' authority the more each claimed his own, causing rivalries to spring up. Their argument, "Who's the greatest?" was the logical result. Each one tried to mark his territory and establish a pecking order with himself on top. The only thing that seemed to unite them back together again was the threat of outside competitors, like the stranger who cast out demons in Jesus' name.

Third, the disciples' displayed a growing sense of entitlement. Somehow the disciples began considering themselves Jesus' all-powerful, handpicked czars. No one, they reasoned, outside their small elite group could possibly be bona fide Keepers of the Truth. Unlike themselves, outsiders/pretenders weren't properly vetted and lacked legitimate credentials so no way could they pass themselves off as the real deal. Ironically the disciples were dangerously close to thinking and acting like Pharisees!

Having said all this, can you understand Jesus' mounting frustrations? Despite all his love, time and effort poured into the Twelve, they remained absolutely clueless.

Nothing Jesus taught them over the last three years penetrated their thick heads! Instead of being humble and open, they remained self-absorbed and close minded. How could Jesus go to the cross trusting these guys to carry on?

Thankfully for us, Jesus overcame his frustration and pressed on to Jerusalem, trusting and obeying his Father in heaven until his last breath...

Up to now I tried to give a thoughtful interpretation of what was motivating the disciples and frustrating Jesus. I also tried to highlight the moral we should take from this story: Despite our Lord's best efforts to communicate the Good News and all its wonderful and liberating implications, we still won't get it until, finally like the post-resurrection disciples, we learn from our mistakes.

Using the pre-Resurrection disciples as Poster Boys for intolerance, self-promotion and exclusion let's take a second look at them and ourselves to see why and how we are prone to fall into the same trap and repeat their mistakes.

Being human the disciples naturally felt threatened because a stranger was doing excellently what they thought only they should be doing. They couldn't or wouldn't recognize and appreciate his God-given gifts for ministry. So, like rival gang members they tried to shut him down. When he refused, they took their case to Jesus who straight away called them on the carpet.

Question: What lessons should we take from this story? How is the Bible speaking to you today?

Maybe about becoming more tolerant of other gifted people who may or may not be in your own flock? And by tolerance I don't mean compromising your core convictions, but maybe we need to become less territorial and adversarial and even more understanding and compassionate. I mentioned in past sermons watching man on the street interviews asking people's opinions about Christians. They quickly reply "judgmental, self-righteous, even hateful." I'm not saying these words describe you, but maybe you and I should work harder to undo the damage done by others, maybe even ourselves, by becoming more intentionally tolerant and compassionate in our dealings with our neighbors.

Another lesson: Don't be threatened when you hear about another congregations or denomination's blessings and success. Be honest, sometimes denominations and local congregations become rivals, questioning one another's doctrines and practice or envious, coveting another's resources and numbers. Sadly it even happens within denominations and even congregations. Differences spark embarrassing explosions causing people outside of organized religion to shake their heads and thank God "I'm not one of them!"

This isn't exactly what Jesus had in mind for his Church is it? Instead, from a position of strength and compassion Christians are called to bear witness to Christ's Gospel by modeling tolerance to our Balkanized world.

Let me let you in on a little secret: intolerance is the mark of weak faith whereas tolerance is a sign of at least striving for spiritual maturity. Does tolerance mean watering down the gospel and being apologetic for your commitment to Christ? Not at all. Instead you tolerate differences because you're secure in your friendship with God. You're sufficiently comfortable with yourself to accept "outsiders," and welcome them with deep love and understanding because you come to realize, being tolerant really means being Christ-like.

After blasting his accusations and warnings at his disciples Jesus finally said, "Be at peace with one another."

May we find our peace in Christ so we really can be at peace with one another, friend and stranger alike.