

## Message: "A Different Standard for Authority"

### Scripture Lesson: Mark 9:38-50

<sup>38</sup>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." <sup>39</sup>But 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. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>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 the reward.

<sup>42</sup>"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. <sup>43</sup>If 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. <sup>45</sup>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. <sup>47</sup>And 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, <sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

<sup>49</sup>"For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup>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."

I am a member of three boards in Missoula that oversee organizations which have as their mission helping people in need. They do amazingly good work on behalf of the homeless, the hungry, the neglected, the isolated, the dispossessed, the formerly incarcerated, the poor, those who are sick, those who are dying, those who are injured, ones who are seeking a medical response to ailments of the body.....in short, these three organizations seek to support those in desperate need. Kind of like what Jesus was about, if we think of his messages, his healing, his comforting, his provision of food for the hungry, his attention to the outcasts, his love for the less fortunate and those who suffer.

But some would say there's a major problem with these organizations - they are not Christian. They have nothing formally to do with Christianity; they are not what we call "faith-based."

On all three of these boards, it may not surprise you that a pastor sitting on the board can really stand out. When I started on these boards, I remember how we'd go around introducing ourselves, saying who we were and what we did for a living. The introductions would go like this: "Hello, I'm Joe Smith, and I'm a lawyer;" "Hi, my name is Mary Anderson, and I am an emergency room nurse," "Hello, I'm Nancy, and I'm an accountant;" and so on. All would flow smoothly until it came to be my turn, where upon I would say, "Hello, I'm John, and I'm a pastor." Crickets and stares. Moreso than any other person around the table. I received glances that said things like "what are you doing here?" and "are you one of those crazy faith people?" and "I really hope he doesn't begin preaching here!" You'd think there were antennae sticking out of the back of my head, or that my eyes were fluorescent orange, or that I had said something ridiculous. And there are

members on all three boards which have gone out of their way to mention to me (once they know I'm a pastor) that they are not persons of faith - not Christian, not Jewish, not Muslim, not Buddhist, not any of the world religions most commonly followed. Some have said it quite plainly - they don't believe in God, they don't believe that there is a God, or that there's anything beyond what we can ascribe to knowledge or human experience. They tend to think that Christianity, and perhaps even faith of any kind, is ridiculous -- Ridiculous, or misguided, or worse, harmful. It's as if their reaction was saying, "What is a person representing a nonsensical take on reality doing here?"

How ironic - to be stereotyped in this way. And how ironic that many Christians tend to do the exact same thing, but in reverse?

For some of my colleagues in pastoral ministry, they have a major problem with organizations that are not faith-based. I have had pastors tell me they have refused membership on any board that does not claim a Christian basis for mission. I have had persons close to me, church members and even extended family members talk about such organizations in a less than flattering way, usually ending with "Well, the problem with that organization is that they are not Christian." Of course, that statement is often used in reference to certain individuals as well; "The problem is that they are not Christian."

The point is this: Many Christians, it would seem, have a problem with anything that isn't Christian. Kind of like what the disciples are expressing in their offense over someone who wasn't a part of their band of disciples doing the work that Jesus charged them to do as his followers. They were offended that those other people performing miracles and healing sick souls weren't a part of the gang, that they were doing things on their own, that they weren't, in effect, "Christian." They had a problem with non-Christians doing Christian works of compassion.

The funny thing is, though, that Jesus didn't seem to have any such problem himself.

I'll leave aside the point that the Christian faith did not exist as such in Jesus' time (that came later, as the progress of history saw to the systematization and organization of Jesus' beliefs); Jesus was Jewish to the core. So were the disciples; likely, they were thinking in terms of Jesus and the Jewish faith, even as it was being differently translated by their master. And here were individuals unknown to them, doing the same kinds of things Jesus advocated. And they had a problem with this, as the scripture testifies:

<sup>38</sup>John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." <sup>39</sup>But 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. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>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 the reward."

LET THE WORK SPEAK FOR ITSELF! Let what they do speak for itself. Do not pre-judge, nor judge at all, regarding what others are doing if it falls in line with the principles Jesus outlines as God-worthy, be they persons of faith or not. Let what they do speak for itself; the repercussions will be evidence enough whether the results are worthy of life.

The bottom-line of this passage is blunt but clear: Automatically demonizing anyone who stands outside the Christian faith is not a practice supported by Jesus. Rather than condemnation by affiliation or lack thereof, Jesus advocates an approach that determines authority and value based upon results - not what do they believe, but how do they live? Not what do they profess, but how they demonstrate what they say? Not their title, but their action, is what matters.

Another way to put it -- from this passage it is clear that the life of faith should be so busy with following Jesus that it has no energy to judge another soul; we should be so busy loving unconditionally, forgiving sincerely, speaking the truth with integrity, opposing injustice vehemently, talking to God expectantly, listening for God's response intensely, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison - doing all the things Jesus did and invited us to do - we should be so busy with such things that we should welcome any efforts to do the same -- whether God is acknowledged or not. The world is full of needs God is determined to address, and we are the tools in Christ's hands that God has chosen to use; but we are not the only tools God puts to work. And, the work is so vast and unending, it is clear we need all the help we can get.

I would like to leave you with the words of Rachael Keefe, pastor of Living Table Church, a United Church of Christ congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She says "Let go of what is not yours to carry, because your hands were meant for holy work. Stop chasing after what your neighbors have; your feet were meant for another road. And if you are staring into anything other than the realm of God, refocus right now—because you cannot have what you cannot envision. Stop expending so much energy comparing yourself to anyone other

than the person God created you to be. You do you, as is often said these days, and let everyone else be who they are. They probably aren't against you.

Jesus has shown us the way to embody love, to create the relationships that are the foundation for the realm of God. Perhaps the time has come to show the world what kind of Christians we are rather than proclaim what we are not."

It is what we demonstrate out of our beliefs that matter more than what we profess, every time.