

Did Jesus Join the Mafia?
Mark 9:38-50
September 26, 2021
Farmville Baptist Church
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These are hard words to hear aren't they? This is not our loving, gentle Jesus. In fact, I can almost hear a Marlon Brando godfather voice as Jesus warns of tying millstones around our necks and tossing us into the sea or cutting off hands and feet and gouging out our eyes. This is how I would really like to deal with this passage (hold up scissors), but instead I invite you to join me as we struggle with these words and see what message they might have for us today.

These harsh words comes right after the passage we heard last week where the disciples are arguing about who among them is the greatest. Not only do the disciples totally miss the point about servant leadership, they have this argument right after Jesus tells them that he will soon be betrayed, killed and rise again. Jesus reminds them that whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all. Then he picks up a child and reminds them that whoever welcomes the least of these welcomes God. These two vignettes bring us to today's lectionary text.

When we pick up the story today, John informs Jesus that they came across someone casting out demons in Jesus's name. "We tried to stop him," John reports, "because he wasn't following us." John thinks he has done Jesus and the work of the kingdom a service here. He thinks he is protecting the ranks, maybe even protecting Jesus from imposter disciples. But instead of being pleased, Jesus quickly sets John and the disciples straight. "Whoever is not against us is for us," he says. "Don't stop them."

Jesus seems to be saying, "These folks may look differently than you do, they may go about things differently, they may have different rituals or play different music or wear different

clothes, but if they are for me, they are for me. The world is big enough and the need is great enough for all of us to be at work for the kingdom.ö

This first part of today's text raises some troubling issues and questions for us. We know that a strong community ó like a congregation ó provides identity, protection and support for its members. A community shapes values and provides norms. But, that same community, if it isn't careful, can restrict freedom and creativity, it can become so insular that its current ways are not suitable for future challenges. öJesus, someone different from us is casting out demons in your nameö John said. A community can become so insular and inward focused that those who are part of the öin crowdö can no longer relate to those outside the community. These issues, that many churches face today, beg the following questions:

How far do we go in relating to those who are different from us ó in values, standards and customs?

How far do we go in protecting ourselves to keep our own values intact?

How do we fellowship with others without losing our own identity and the benefits of that identity?¹

There are no easy answers to these questions and issues, but they are ones that every church must wrestle with and seek to answer as we all figure out how to move forward in this post-pandemic, post-Christian culture. (Pause) And that's the easier part of today's passage.

In the second part of our text for today, Jesus turns his attention to stumbling blocks. His words are stern as he warns the disciples that if any of them put a stumbling block in front of the least of these ó the ones they tried to exclude in last week's text ó it would be worse than sinking to the bottom of the sea with a big chunk of concrete tied around your neck.

So let's ask the obvious question here. What exactly is a stumbling block? The root word for stumbling block gives us the word "scandal." Heaven knows the big C church has been involved in enough of those lately to cause many to stumble away from the faith. When we cause someone to stumble it can mean several things: it can mean we dismiss them as unimportant, we refuse them hospitality or hinder them from joining the community. It can also mean that we divert someone from the faith or lead them into sin.

You see, as Joyce Ann Mercer put it, the disciples were so preoccupied with their own power and positioning that it threatened their ability to attend to the well-being of the faith community, especially to the least of these.ⁱⁱ In addition, we often live with a scarcity mentality, don't we? We think that if others gain power or resources, there will be less for us. But that's human economy, not God's. Karolyn Lewis notes, "When we find ourselves placing stumbling blocks in the paths of others, the truth is that we do not want them to succeed, to grow in faith, to be better disciples. We don't want them to advance, because their advancement is inevitably about our inability to do so. We don't want them to be farther along than we are."ⁱⁱⁱ Ouch! Jesus's harsh words in this text let us know that he takes these sins very seriously. We must temper our own behaviors because what we do affects others. People "hear" the gospel or not as much or more by our behavior than by the words we speak.

Jesus understands that not only do we put stumbling blocks in the way of others, we often put them in front of ourselves. Listen to the next verses again: if **your** own hand causes **you** to stumble, if **your** own foot causes **you** to stumble, if **your** own eyes cause **you** to stumble, it is better to live without them than to end up in hell. This is strong language. The word for hell in this passage is Gehenna in Greek $\acute{\omicron}$ and it refers to a literal garbage dump south of Jerusalem where fires always smoldered and burned. It is better to live your

life without hands or feet or eyes, Jesus says, than to spend your life in the burning, smelly garbage dump. The reality is, the guilt of being a stumbling block, to ourselves or others, can feel like hell on earth, can't it?^{iv}

So how do we cause ourselves to stumble? Most obviously it is by falling into behaviors that lead us away from, instead of towards God. I'm not going to list those behaviors this morning. While some things we get involved in are immoral or harmful to everyone, in other cases what is a problem for me may not be a problem for you.

But often our own stumbling blocks are mental and emotional aren't they? How many of you have ever thought or said something like: I can't be a leader or serve because

I don't have enough faith,

I don't go to church often enough.

I don't read my Bible regularly.

I don't pray enough.

I don't do enough good works,

I don't spend enough time or give enough money to the church.

In short, I'm just not good enough. I'm not worthy. (PAUSE)

Karoline Lewis reminds us, Jesus knows we do this, and he says that we should stop. Just stop. Because contrary to what the disciples thought that day on the road with Jesus, being a Christian isn't a competition. It isn't about who gets to the finish line first or who is the best disciple, it's about following.^v When we truly follow, what are our eyes focused on? The one that we're following - not on ourselves or the person next to us. Following requires paying attention to what is in front of you - not because you and the person next to you don't matter, but because the person you're following - Jesus - has a claim on how you see yourself and

how you see others. When we truly see what is in front of us— Jesus, what Jesus does, who Jesus is and isn't— then the chances for stumbling blocks diminish. We start to see that Jesus is beyond our best efforts to limit, exclude, or silence.^{vi} Thanks be to God for that. (PAUSE)

Back in our text, Jesus's next words seem out of place. "For everyone will be salted with fire. 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."

These words seem out of place with the rest of this morning's text, but they are not at all when we take a closer look. First Jesus says, "we'll all be salted with fire — we'll all be tested and hopefully purified as we seek to remove the stumbling blocks in our own paths or deal with the ones we tend to put in front of others. Then Jesus says, "Salt is good, but if it has lost its saltiness, what good is it? Have salt in yourselves." This reminds us of the Sermon on the Mount, doesn't it? Instead of causing ourselves and others to stumble, we are to be salt and light — drawing all — even the least of these — to God and into this beloved community. When we do this, Jesus notes, we will be at peace with one another. Friends, that's the goal. To live as humble servants, at peace with God, ourselves and others, seeking to draw everyone into the light of God and into beloved community. May it be so for each of us and all of us today.

Please bow your heads and close your eyes as we enter a time of reflection:

In the quietness of these moments, I invite you to be honest with yourself and with God.

In what ways do you put stumbling blocks in front of others? Who do you dismiss as unimportant, or treat as least of these? Who might you divert from the faith or who have you led into sin?

As a congregation, what stumbling blocks do we erect that might appear as a lack of hospitality, or who do we hinder from joining the community ó by our acts of omission or by acts of our will?

What stumbling blocks have you set before yourself?

What stumbling blocks have we set before ourselves as a congregation?

What do we need to ask God to remove from our paths as individuals and as a congregation so that we can be salt and light ó so that we may live in peace with one another?

God stands ready if we will but put our trust in the Lord.

ⁱⁱ Henry Adams, "Pastoral Perspective," Feasting on the Word, p. 116.

ⁱⁱ Joyce Ann Mercer, "Theological Perspective," Feasting on the Gospels, p. 290.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-08/september-27-26th-sunday-ordinary-time?code=Gk3uBXtW5fmeJwuWpYlv>, access 9-24-2021.

^{iv} Mary Jane Kerr Cornell, Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Gospels, p. 290.

^v Lewis, 9-24-2021.

^{vi} Ibid.