

## Let's Get Serious!

Mark 9:38-50

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
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### I

The story is told of two business men who were bitter rivals and who were always trying to outdo one another.

Whenever one got a new computer,  
the other would get two new computers.

When one got a new cell phone,  
the other got two new cell phones

When one built a new warehouse,  
the other built two new warehouses.

One day an angel appears to one of them and makes an offer:

"You can ask for anything you like and you will get it.  
However, your rival will get two of whatever you ask for?"

"You mean" he asks, "if I ask for \$1,000,000 I will get it?"

"Yes, you will," answers the angel, "but your rival will get \$2,000,000."

"How soon do I have to answer?" asks the businessman.

"I will be back tomorrow morning for the answer."

That night the businessman tosses and turns,  
but when the angel comes back he has his answer ready.

"I will settle" he says, "for one blind eye!"

## II

It's a gruesome story, but it reminds us that we live in a world of jealousy and competition.

Companies compete with one another to offer the best services or the most reliable products.

They spend a lot of money on advertising to convince us that their products are better than anyone else's.

Most of us can name the slogans companies use to entice us to purchase their products:

*With a name like Smuckers...it has to be good.*

*The ultimate driving machine.*

*It keeps going...and going...and going.*

*Just do it.*

When it comes to Volkswagen, so much for *Truth in Engineering*.

Sports teams have intense rivalries and the sports announcers try to convince us that the game we are about to watch is the most important game of all.

You would think the world of Christianity would be free of this kind of jealous competition, wouldn't you?

Yet how often do we see Christian churches trying to outdo each other in attendance and programs and community outreach?

I've sat in many clergy meetings over the last 35 years and more often than not the conversation turns to how much church attendance and giving have increased or which pastor is moving to which large church.

Think about it: do you ever hear words like this from church people?—

“Ours is the friendliest church in town!”

"Our church has the finest choir,  
 the best Sunday school,  
 the most inspiring preacher,  
 the most creative youth ministry...."

"We are the *true* church...the rest are apostate!"

I have to wonder: is jostling for position or trying to outdo one another fitting for a community which claims to follow a Lord who taught that humble service is the road his followers are to take?

### III

In today's Gospel lesson, we continue on the road with Jesus following the watershed moment of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi.

From a literary perspective, Peter's confession serves as the centerpiece of Mark's Gospel.

From that moment on the Gospel writer takes us on an urgent run up to Jerusalem—Jesus' passion and the cross.

Last week, we saw how Jesus told his disciples a second time that in Jerusalem he would be betrayed into human hands, killed, and then rise again.

The disciples did not understand what he was saying,  
 they were afraid to ask,  
 and on the way they ended up arguing about  
 who was the greatest among them.

In response Jesus pointedly reminded them that true greatness means being willing to be last and the servant of the least.

In today's continuation of that passage, we find Jesus getting serious with his students.

If the issue last week was jealousy and competitiveness within the circle of disciples as to who was the greatest,  
 the issue this week seems to be competition with those outside the disciples who are also doing ministry in Jesus' name.

John (who is later known as the apostle of love, but here doesn't come across as very loving) says to Jesus,

*“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name,  
and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.”*

The disciples are indignant that these outsiders are doing the work of Jesus without proper credentials.

They want Jesus to put a stop to these interlopers here and now.

Have you noticed how we Christians are as bad as anyone at fighting to protect our own turf?

Here's a story to illustrate the point:

A man was walking across a bridge and came upon another man standing right on the edge, about to plunge to his death.

The first man shouted "Stop! Are you a Christian?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am."

"Well so am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"I'm Protestant,"

"Well so am I. Are you Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist?"

"I'm Baptist."

"Wow... I am too. Are you Southern Baptist or Northern Baptist?"

"I'm Southern Baptist,"

"Me too, that's amazing! Are you original Southern Baptist or Southern Baptist reformed?"

"I'm Southern Baptist reformed."

"I can't believe it, so am I. But tell me, are you Reformed Southern Baptist of the reformation of 1879, or Reformed Southern Baptist of the reformation of 1915?"

He answered, "Reformed Southern Baptist, reformation of 1915."

To which the first man said, "Die, you heretic," and he pushed him off the bridge.

The disciples just do not understand where Jesus' teachings would soon take them.

They were the chosen people, the Jews,  
but soon the doors of Judaism would open to the world.

Moses saved the ancient Hebrews but Jesus would soon save the world.

The Jerusalem Temple was the house of God but the Church around the world would soon house the Spirit of the risen Lord.

Israel was God's nation but those borders would soon be gone and a new Holy Nation without borders would be established.

History would soon replace the priest in the Holy of Holies  
with the priesthood of all believers.

The disciples want to protect their turf,  
maintain control,  
but Jesus has a better way.

They were to be the facilitators not manipulators of a new kingdom.

If others come along with gifts and talents and a calling to serve in the name of Jesus, do not hinder them.

*"Whoever is not against us is for us."*

#### IV

Jesus then goes on to a series of sayings that are arguably the hardest in the gospels.

Jesus first instructs the disciples not to cause little ones to sin.

Remember last week, Jesus took a child,  
 who in that culture had absolutely no standing,  
 placed that child in the midst of the disciples,  
 and said, “If you welcome this little one,  
 you welcome me and the one who sent me.”

Now he warns those same disciples about doing anything that would put a stumbling block in the path of one of these little ones.

It would be better to be thrown into the lake tied to a millstone than to do such a thing, he warns.

If your hand or foot cause you to sin, cut it off.

If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

Better to be crippled in this life than thrown into hell in the next.

Obviously there is some hyperbole involved in these verses,  
 and short of the church father Origen,  
 I don't know of anyone who takes these verses literally.

The point Jesus is making is that we need to get serious about anything in our lives that prevents us from following in his way.

Whatever gets in the way of your discipleship needs to go...  
 needs to be jettisoned.

Then Jesus says, be like salt and be at peace with one another.

These sayings seem to be thrown together,  
 cobbled together by Mark,  
 without really being related to each other.

But maybe not.

It would not be unusual in first century Palestine to compile several sayings together onto a single document.

Papyrus, the paper of the day, was expensive and every square inch was utilized.

But let me suggest that there is a relationship between these verses.

The relationship is found in the very last verse of chapter nine, verse 50—

*"Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."*

Have salt Jesus says.

Be like salt:

Preserve what is best.

How do we do that?

The previous verses give the answer:

If others are working for the Kingdom, don't stop them.

In other words, don't fight turf wars in my name.

Those who follow me and are weak in faith—

the children,

the defenseless,

the poor—

don't cause them to stumble;

protect them...

strengthen them...

care for them.

Make sure that they too have peace in their lives.

And then have peace in your own life.

Don't let sin war among the members of your body.

Be salt...preserve what is good by being at peace.

Be at peace with God

and be at peace with each other.

Perhaps you have heard the poem "A Bag of Tools" by Roy Sharpe:

*Isn't it strange  
That princes and kings,  
And clowns that caper  
In sawdust rings,  
And common people  
Like you and me  
Are builders for eternity?*

*Each is given a bag of tools,  
A shapeless mass,  
A book of rules;  
And each must make—  
Ere life has flown—  
A stumbling block  
Or a stepping stone.*

This is a wonderful summary of the Gospel text.

Each of us is given a bag of tools.

And each of us must decide whether we will be...

*a stumbling block* bringing sorrow and pain into the lives of others,  
or a *stepping stone* bringing peace and holiness.

Peacemaking is about stepping stones.

One person armed with the Gospel of peace can transform the world.

## V

Telemachus was a monk who lived in the 5th century CE, and his story is a story of tremendous courage.

He felt God saying to him, "Go to Rome."

So he put his possessions in a sack,  
left the monastery,

and set out for Rome.

When he arrived in the city, people were thronging in the streets.

He asked why all the excitement and was told that this was the day that the gladiators would be fighting in the coliseum.

He thought to himself, "Four centuries after Christ and they are still killing each other, for enjoyment?"

He ran to the coliseum and heard the gladiators saying,  
"Hail to Caesar, we die for Caesar"  
and he thought, "this isn't right."

He jumped over the railing,  
went out into the middle of the field,  
got between two gladiators,  
and tried to stop them.

The crowd became enraged and stoned the peacemaker to death.

When the Emperor of Rome, Honorius, heard about the monk, he declared him a Christian martyr and put an end to the games.

Legend has it that the very last gladiatorial game was the one in which Telemachus died.

Jesus said, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Sometimes it seems we have gladiatorial games going on...  
inside the church,  
inside our homes,  
in our work places,  
in the nations of the world.

And those games have been going on for as long as we can remember!

Who will be a Telemachus?

Who will be the monk who jumps into the arena,

sacrifices himself,  
and brings peace?

Peace can be made but it sometimes comes at a heavy price.

## VI

My friends, let's get serious.

Get serious about living the radical grace of the God who loves all,  
welcomes all, and redeems all.

Get serious about being getting rid of anything that keeps us from living as  
faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Get serious about extending the grace and acceptance we have  
found in Christ to those currently outside of the church.

Get serious about living as Christ's servants in the world,  
offering the cup of cold water in Jesus' name.

When we are serious about bearing the name of Christ,  
we will by no means lose the reward he offers.

**Let's get serious!**

Amen.