

A Question of Cooperation

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Mark 9:38-50

Today I continue with the third in a series of sermons on questions. The first, two weeks ago, was a question of identity. The second, last week, was a question of attention. Today the question is one of cooperation.

The passage you are about to hear from the 9th chapter of Mark's Gospel follows immediately on the heels of last's weeks story of Jesus placing a child in the midst of his disciples, who had been arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. As you listen to today's text, you should know that earlier in the same chapter the disciples have been unable to help a man whose son had been tormented by a demon. When Jesus shows up, the man turns to him and asks Jesus to heal his boy, Jesus tells him, "All things are possible for one who believes." And then, after the man says, "I believe, help my unbelief," Jesus casts out the demon. Later, when the disciples ask him, "Uh, why weren't we able to cast it out?" Jesus replies, "This kind comes out only through prayer." Wow, prayer. Something that basic that the disciples apparently forgot. How embarrassing. Keep that in mind as we turn now to the reading of scripture.

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.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.'

'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. 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. 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. 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, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.'

'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.' How's that for a challenging text?

Oh, how I want to say that the statement that the disciple John makes to Jesus at the beginning of today's text is **surprising**. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop them, because they were not following us." I **so want** to say that it is **surprising** that the disciples wouldn't be overjoyed at the good news that a person was being delivered from some demonic force that had been pulling them down. I want to say that their reaction was surprising **because, after all**, here was someone, not "trying" to cast out demons, mind you, **but successfully doing it. Successfully** setting other human beings free from some force that was sucking the life out of them, destroying them from the inside out, robbing them of joy and happiness the way the kind of demons that plague people do. You don't have to have to embrace a literal view of demons to know in your gut how traumatic experiences, abuse and addiction, anxiety, rejection and self or other-hatred can torment a person and almost feel demonic.

All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, wrestle with our own demons. That's something I've learned over 26 years of being an ordained pastor. Relax. I'm not going to talk about each of your personal demons, and I'm not really going to talk about mine.

So you'd think—right?—you'd think that seeing someone being delivered from something that has caused them anguish and stunted their spirit—would be a cause for celebration. Especially to those who followed Jesus, the very embodiment of God's love and healing. But in the case of John and the other disciples, **it was not**. It wasn't a cause for celebration at all.

I'd like to say I'm surprised by that, but I know too much about human nature. I know about how envy can rear its ugly head. Like my tendency when I see some church that is larger than ours to secretly grumble about how they have somehow sold out, or their pastor must have some real problem, or they have bad theology (regardless of all the good they do for others).

The disciples' sense of envy had to be an 11 on a scale of 10 because, at least as Mark tells it, not long before they'd come across this person casting out demons in Jesus' name, they themselves had been unable to cast out a demon. And they had to be reminded later by Jesus, that when they dealing with such hard cases, they had to do something as basic as pray. You know, **to actually ask God for help** when they were facing something difficult. So maybe they were a little wounded and embarrassed to watch someone else having success. Can you blame them? Can you blame them for being envious?

Or maybe they were just doing what human beings seem to do, envy and embarrassment or not. Divide into camps, retreat into corners, group into tribes. We humans have a tendency to define ourselves over against others. It's been that way from time immemorial.

All of us know in this increasingly polarized and polarizing culture, how easy it is to divide in to us and them. We live in metropolitan Washington, for God's sake, which has become—if it wasn't always—all about us and them. All about who gets the win, who gets the credit, who gets their way.

In a polarized and polarizing culture, the pronouns we employ matter. So pay attention to the pronouns that the disciples use when they come to Jesus. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop them, because they were not following **us**." **We** tried to stop **them** because **they** were not following **us**. Hmm. They weren't following **us**. It didn't matter whether they were following **Jesus**. It didn't matter whether they were doing good things in **his name**. It didn't matter that hurting children of God were being set free from bondage to something that was destroying their souls. No. We tried to stop them because they weren't **following us**.

Jesus' reaction is to say, "Guys, guys, guys. Don't stand in their way. Whoever is not against **us** is for **us**. And no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."

What Jesus does there is to tell his disciples, "If you want to talk about us, then **your us is too small**."

Now, in the context of the early church to which the Gospel of Mark was first addressed, this story surely functioned to tell different groups to live and let live, to get along, and even to co-operate. Not only were there were Jewish-born Christians and Gentile-born Christians, there were factions forming even early on over doctrines, and ethical standards, and personalities. Read through a few

of Paul's letters, or the letters of John or the epistle of James, and you'll get a sense of the tensions operative in the early church. They continue to this day

The comedian Emo Phillips is perhaps most famous, at least among preachers, for a joke that was named the best religious joke of all time back in 2005. It goes like this. *Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"*

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

"Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." And I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Can you see how as they talked their "us" just kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller? Of course, that's crazy. It is crazy how differences, sometimes even little ones, can lead people from truly caring about helping someone, seeing their humanity, recognizing their need, to actively working to harm or ignore them, letting them go unheard and unhealed. Rather than cooperating in the name of the common good, getting to the truth, getting to healing, what happens when it is all about us and them is that you compete. Competition is good. Even Franklin Delano Roosevelt said that. Competition is good but it has its limits. At a certain point we have to move beyond competition into cooperation. Because if we don't, real live human beings get **really hurt**, rather than being **really heard**.

Today's passage suggests that this kind of thing is something that, as that quirky corn-rowed Presbyterian author Anne Lamott says about some of her own thoughts about others, "*causes Jesus to want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish.*"ⁱ

You can tell that Jesus is distressed because the fact that the disciples try to stop healing going on his name provokes perhaps his most heated and hyperbolic rhetoric directed towards them. I mean he hammers the point home.

After telling the disciples that whoever is not against us is for us, he shares with them that they better not put a stumbling block in front of any of these little ones who believe in me. And Jesus goes on, with what I hope to God is hyperbole, "If your hand causes you to stumble cut it off and if your foot causes you to stumble cut it off and if your eye causes you to stumble tear it out. Because it is better to have one hand, one foot, one eye than to be separated from God." Now that's surely metaphor and that's surely rhetorical overreach, and no doubt it IS hyperbole, but what Jesus is trying to do is to bring the point home that shouldn't let anything get in the way of helping the little ones, by which he doesn't necessarily mean just children, but those new to faith, and the people who are vulnerable in this world, the people who so often go unheard, unhelped, unhealed.

What matters, Jesus says, is **not ego**, not pride, not desire for comfort, not sense of entitlement, not scoring political points or defending doctrine, not getting your way at any cost. **What matters, what always matters in every circumstance**, is that people get helped and healed in the name of love. What matters is not setting up stumbling blocks for these little ones.

Can you see? It's the little ones, the vulnerable ones, who matter in the calculation, who most need to be heard. That's Jesus arithmetic, that's his calculus. It's the little ones who most need to be heard. And here's the thing about that.

The thing about being heard—being heard and knowing you've been heard—being seen and knowing you've been seen—being welcomed and knowing you've been really and fully and truly welcomed—being believed and knowing you've been believed as you tell the truth of what you've done and what's been done to you and know that that truth has been heard and not ignored—is that it can help cast out some of the worst demons and heal some of the deepest hurts in our lives. Because what is demonic and destructive of our souls thrives when it is hidden. It doesn't want to be exposed.

One of the things that has happened in our society, and the past week has been evidence of it, is that people who have been sexually assaulted have at least from time to time been empowered to speak that truth, sometimes with quavering speech. And people who have been cast to the margins and treated as less than have found a voice and increasingly a hearing and a welcome, imperfect though that welcome may be.

Sojourners magazine created a video for communities of faith in the wake of this past week. A chorus of different women, different ages and cultures and colors, speak. And they say things like:

You are resilient. You are not alone. You are carving the path for those who will come behind you. We are allowed to be angry. We should be angry. You have survived. You are still here, and I'm glad you're still here. First off, I want to ask what it is that you need from me right now. If you want somebody to be angry with you, I already am. If you want my prayers, they are yours. If you want to just sit in a room together asking God why this happened, knowing that we are not going to get a full or satisfying answer to that question, let's do that. There is no feeling, there is no shame, there is no suffering that is too great that God will not be with you and walk with you and love you. You are not crazy. What happened to you was real, and if the people in your life don't believe you, keep working until you find the people who do.ⁱⁱ

There is healing and there is hope in that video. And by the way, if you want to talk to Pastor Katie or Pastor Susan about your experiences, they will be glad to talk. But more important than talk, they will listen.

At the end of today's passage, there is an odd nod to salt. *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.*

I think most of us know that salt was a precious commodity in the ancient world of the New Testament. It remains so today. Salt was used to preserve, it was used purify, it was used to heal, and it was used to bring out the flavor in food, among other things. And elsewhere, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, Jesus told the disciples that they were the salt of the earth.

Everyone, the text says, will be *salted with fire*.

I struggled this week with what on earth that phrase means. Everyone will be salted with fire. My best guess as to what that means is that it is either somehow related to the Holy Spirit bringing out the salt in us or that it is related to hardship and difficulty bringing out the salt in us.

Fire has been used in the process of refining. Hard times, difficulties, can be like a refining fire that brings out the best in us, the essence, that reveals what's really important, what really matters for us. Fire, hardship, difficulty in our lives can show us to be worth our salt.

So can water, by the way. Think about the way communities back after Hurricane Harvey last year and now after Hurricane Florence, think about the way communities came together and cooperated. It didn't matter what bumper stickers were on the back of their trucks and cars. They cooperated. They cared about the little one, the vulnerable one, the one whose church was filled with mud.

They were salted with fire and water.

I think these days in our country, in our culture, in our communities and churches are like that. Can we move beyond a sense of competition to a cooperation in the name of healing and a common good and what is right and loving? Can we move to being at peace with one another, co-operating in the name of an "us" that just keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger? That's the question. Who know what the answer will be?

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999).

ⁱⁱ The video can be found at the Sojourners website. <https://sojo.net/articles/i-believe-you-church-leaders-respond-survivors>