

On the Team

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ 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." ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ 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.

⁴² "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. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁷ 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, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ "For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ 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."

First let me thank you for allowing Leroy and me to go on an extended vacation! This was our very first 10 day cruise and we went through the Panama Canal locks on the Atlantic side, floated in the lake for a few hours and came back through the Atlantic locks. We also visited a banana plantation in Costa Rico and learned about tequila and chocolate in Cozumel. We saw a sloth hanging in a tree and a monkey lounging on an electrical wire. We were entertained by musicians, singers, dancers, a juggler, a ventriloquist, a hypnotist; watched movies, learned about skin care, steamed and baked in the spa, had a fun and relaxing time, and ate religiously!

One thing was different this time. Rather than having assigned seating for dinner, we had "Your Time Dining." We had always sat with different people at breakfast and lunch, but had always sat at our assigned table for dinner and gotten to dine with and to know four other couples during the cruise. This time we could sit alone or choose to share a table with others. So we met wonderful people and had great conversations throughout the cruise. We met:

- Alonzo and Jennifer from Mobile, a striking pair because their height distinguished them;
- Frank and Terry, also from Mobile, with clear political opinions;
- Butch and Rhoda who have retired to Florida; but sound like they are New Yorkers;
- Welta, who left her ill husband at home, and her daughter who is an elementary teacher, but is staying home with her young twins;
- A couple from Windsor;
- Nikki, who she and her late husband had been teachers for children on military bases. She was traveling with her sister-in-law who has health challenges;
- Betty and her husband from Louisiana, who may be related to my sister-in-law. Her ministry is making clothes and sending them to Africa;
- Mrs. Murtle and husband who are long-time cruisers and have a daughter and grandchildren in Flint;
- A couple from Florida who ate lobster 4 times during the 10 days;
- A couple, the man graduated from Purdue in 1962
- A couple who were convinced someone took their seats on the tour bus and they weren't having it!
- The 91-year-old who was recognized by the captain for his loyal cruising on Carnival;
- A man who retired from high school coaching, who collects and sells sports cards;
- A woman traveling with 2 special needs children and who told me she has an adult son living in a group home;
- A couple who were concerned that they were not in Nashville on Sunday to teach their Sunday school classes;
- Brenda from Nashville;
- Anna who was originally from Puerto Rico;
- Ann, who Leroy gave pre-marital counseling;
- A great-grandmother from Indianapolis who was traveling alone;
- A retired Marine and his wife who had traveled the world during his service and now for pleasure;

- Alberta who walked the jogging track each morning and her friend Barbara who didn't care where the ship went as long as the casino was open;
- The man who had to take 28 pills and 4 injections each day;
- Emma and her husband from Pensacola;
- Carolyn Lee and Oscar, she was a retired educator;
- Sylvia and Johnnie;
- 3 Smith couples at one table for lunch, but none had met previously;
- One of the Smith couples had almost gotten left in Portugal because the time changed on her watch;
- So many Alabama and Auburn fans we couldn't keep them straight;
- Folks from Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas;
- Sharon and Drew – Sharon is a weaver and evangelist who, if she could afford to would cruise to preach the gospel to guests and staff. Drew and his son have opened a rural internet provider business and he does audio-visual for their mega church in Texas. Both have a passion for new Christians. They were the ones who told us about the Sunday worship service organized by a face book group.

It was Alonzo and Jennifer who told us about a spontaneous group that organized a worship service with a retired military chaplain. The cruise director even announced it on Sunday morning. We sang a Negro spiritual and Rev. Brown, who usually ministered in a nursing home with memory-loss patients, was excited to preach to a standing-room only crowd. Another retired pastor offered special prayer for those with private issues or special needed for healing. We could hear the hymns of the other worship service – they had come prepared for a song fest. Even in a community of less than 5,000, counting guests and staff, there were people worshipping in different ways.

Mark's community wanted to know who was in and who was out. On a community as small as a cruise ship community we ask similar questions. A strong community enhances the lives of its members. The community is a place of identity, if only for a time, where people have a sense of belonging because they are known and recognized.

The community provides protection and support. The community shapes values and provides cultural norms.

But there are risks in a strong community. The expectations and demands of a social order may restrict the freedom and creativity of a person. The past ways may not be suitable for the challenges of the future. A strong community may be so focused on itself that it loses the capacity to relate to those outside.

There is a constant tension between being inclusive and being exclusive, with serious questions to be faced. Even on a cruise ship there were the experienced vs. the new folks; first timers and people who had 500+ days on the seas. How far should a community go in relating to other people who are different, and how far should it go in excluding those who have different standards and values and customs? How far must a community go in isolating itself from outsiders to keep its values? How does a community keep its identity if it recognizes the validity of differing ways and structures of other communities? How do people in a community fellowship with others without losing their defining distinctiveness?

The concern about inclusiveness and exclusiveness is particularly intense for the church. For the church community is bound together not just by common interest or mutual enjoyment, but by convictions about the fundamental issues of human existence: what we believe most deeply, what gives value and meaning to our existence, under what obligations we live, how we define and achieve the good life, who we are.

When we deal with such fundamental and significant issues, it often becomes more difficult to be sensitive and accepting of those who have different convictions. To offer one example: Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, at an outdoor service at a baseball stadium in New York, prayers were offered by religious leaders from many different traditions. A group in the diocese of a bishop who participated in this service started a movement to depose him because by participating he had recognized the legitimacy of

the prayers of others. How do we respect those who believe differently from what we have been taught – do we run for the hills or do we look for common ground?

How do we keep the integrity of our own community without isolating ourselves from others? The first followers of Jesus confronted the issue when they came across someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. They tried to stop him "because he was not following us." He was not one of "us," one of their group, and they wanted to keep the integrity of the way of Jesus and the power of Jesus. What would happen if everybody started doing things in the name of Jesus? Jesus had certain powers, and through him the disciples had been given powers. The disciples were averse to allowing others outside their own group to exercise such power, even if it was in the good cause of casting out demons.

When they told Jesus about the person, he somehow did not seem as concerned about the situation. He said to them, "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." Preserving the power of his own group was not a priority for Jesus. If good were being done by others, their actions were to be affirmed. Jesus went on to say to the disciples that as they are ministered to by outsiders, it will come as blessing both to themselves and to those who aid them: "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."

How can a community keep its own identity and still be open to those outside? There is no simple answer to that question, but every community needs to be aware of where the line is drawn between insider and outsider, and of the impact that the decision of how to relate to others has on both those within and those without. The word of Jesus to his disciples reminds us to be sensitive to the issues involved, and his word pushes us to run some risk in relating to those who are not part of our community.

After dealing with the disciples' unwillingness to welcome the outsider, Jesus pointed to some other concerns his disciples would face as leaders, concerns that all of us who

seek to minister in Christ's name will face. First, he warned against putting stumbling blocks in the way of others who are seeking to find their way toward faith in him. In vivid language he warned that "it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." We need to ponder the risks for us if our failures of love, our distortions of the way of Christ, our too narrow understandings of the truth, our quickness to pronounce judgment cause others to stumble as they are trying to find the way of faithful living.

Second, Jesus warned his disciples and us about the risk that we may stumble ourselves. Again in vivid language, he declared that if our hand or foot or eye causes us to stumble, it is better to get rid of it than to miss the way of God and end up in the torments of hell. These words were spoken not to outsiders but to those who were seeking to follow him. His vivid words alerted them and us that the righteousness of God must be taken seriously.

Finally, Jesus talked about the salt of the disciples, the qualities that would preserve and enhance their community. From all that Jesus said as he journeyed the way to Jerusalem with his disciples, it becomes clear that their saltiness involves being humble in their relationships with each other, giving of themselves for others, reaching out and accepting all the people around them. They are to "be at peace with one another." **Harry B. Adams**

Mark's gospel is for our instructions. We are on the same team, whether we attend the mega church, the small church, the face book church, the Bible study group. We are the community of believers. We are to "be at peace with one another."

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).