

Mark 9:38-50

A Serious Welcome and Warning

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Let us pray: God, teach us that our faith is serious. Reveal to us your incredibly personal requests. Today we ask that you place us in the middle of your upside-down story of love. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you oh our rock and our redeemer.

Marge VandeSchmidt's husband, Ernie, has finally agreed to join the church and was preparing for membership and to be baptized. Pastor Katherine had just finished up her last baptism study class by asking solemnly, "Baptism is a serious step with communal and eschatological ramifications. Are you prepared for this commitment, Ernie?"

"I think so," Ernie replied. "Marge has been planning the party for weeks. She's making all kinds of little appetizers and a big cake for all of our guests. Yep, I'm ready."

"I don't mean that," Pastor Katherine responded. "I mean, are you sure you're ready to go through with this? Are you prepared spiritually and is your heart and will open to the indwelling of the transformative Holy Spirit?"

Ernie looked flummoxed then calmly smiled.

“You betcha,” he replied, then with a measured tone: “I’ve got Leinenkugel’s Oktoberfest on ice and Nueske’s jalapeno cheddar sticks on toothpick plates. I have faithfully prepared”

To this, Katherine threw her hands up in the air exclaiming “Lord give me patience with this silly-daft man, take me to Moon Beach and surround me with women! I’m outta here!”

I haven’t heard from Katherine since!

Really none of the story was true, but the joke illustrates how easily we overlook divine corollaries in daily life. And today, Jesus elaborates on the seriousness of being welcoming and offers words warning, to shepherd us and our community, along our journey to God’s everlasting grace.

Our scripture is really a lengthy set of didactic teachings between Jesus, the teacher, and his pupils, the disciples. Jesus instructs them in person, basically obligating their response. His words are harsh, designed to create moral change and introduce his upside-down understanding of social righteousness. What is missing from this hellish discourse of worms and appendage removal is the wider narrative context that comes before these serious teachings. We are missing how this scripture serves as inflection moment, and how such harsh language is applicable to us and spoken in love.

Before this discourse, Jesus and the disciples are traveling through Galilee on the way to a home in Capernaum. He was sharing the Messianic secret

with the select twelve, telling them of his impending death at human hands and then resurrection on the third day. Jesus then issued the teaching that sacrifice for others is prerequisite to discipleship. He said:

““Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

To demonstrate the meaning of sacrificial servanthood, he sat his disciples down and placed a small child in the middle of them. He hugged this child and said to them,

“If anyone welcomes one child like this in my name, they welcome me. And if anyone welcomes me, it isn't me they welcome, but the one who sent me.’

Tender. Thoughtful. Caring. Immediate. Personal. Such is our Christ.

One theologian elaborates:

To try to jolt them out of their upside-down thinking, Jesus, not for the last time, uses a child as a teaching aid. Aside from normal family affection children were not rated highly in the ancient world; (but) anyone who receives even a child in his name will receive Jesus himself, and thereby will receive also ‘the one who sent me’... In other words, anyone at all associated with Jesus can become the means of access to royalty, and even to divinity; the disciples aren't special in that sense at all. -N.T.Wright

This is the inflection moment in scripture where Gods socially formative presence and the immediacy of Jesus divinity- changes the discussion.

This is where it becomes apparent that serious business is afoot- not just out there, but in here, in the often impenetrable will of our human hearts.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,^a it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

The word the NRSV translates as “put a stumbling block in front” or “cause people to stumble” is *skandalizein*. This is actually a very harsh word. In our media saturated world where almost no action or word causes us to be shocked anymore, *skandalizein* means being so horrified that one simply cannot remain in the same place or go forward along the same path where one previously found themselves.

Traumatic, jarring, dislocating- that is *skandalizein*.

Jesus offers a warning: do not speak words or commit acts that divert people from their faith or discipleship. For if we do, we risk so much for ourselves and for them and for the young and growing body of Christ that was the early church. Hence the long winded and rather grotesque images of bodily mutilation and drowning- Jesus likened the early community to what would become his living body, a body which itself, would be redeemed and sanctified from violence and death to peacefulness and eternal life.

“Be at peace with one another” are his parting words today.

Be at harmony within one-self, welcome one another, receive God; even in a world that can be horrific and uncaring. And Jesus calls us to place ourselves, you and me, in the middle of it all, as invaluable beloved members of the one body of Christ.

A joyful part of my work is to listen to people's faith stories and to how they have felt drawn to First Congregational. And there has been a particular opportunity repeatedly shared with me lately: conversation-based sermons. One woman shared with me:

We had been looking for a church and after visiting three churches where people barely even spoke to us, our first time here there was a conversation-based sermon. We had to turn to people around us and there were questions in the bulletin to discuss. And the neighbors in my pew, who are now good friends, turned to me and started to earnestly share about the questions. Then they asked me to share. And they listened to me. I have never been listened to in a church. It was so persona I was dumbstruck, and I knew that I was home.

I wonder if this story helps some of us to reframe what can be a hellish self-exposure, as an opportunity to place each in the middle and practice being deeply welcoming. Moments like this nourish the sinew of our communities' tendons even if we are stretched, strengthen our bones even if they are a little cracked, to offer each other warmth in the coldness of the times we find ourselves.

Have you considered that a single conversation can offer the opportunity to receive God's son in living word and alter the path of the person to your right or to you left?

Jesus' welcome and warning is meant to strengthen the diverse communities that are His physical and spiritual body.

A strong community provides both for itself and for the world around it. A robust community is constantly in negotiation with its resources and the needs it seeks to address. This requires purposeful decisions accompanied with real tensions. Each individual in the community must negotiate the expectations and demands of the social order which at times can restrict their creativity and freedom for a greater good. Likewise, every community faces the difficult challenge of growing from its past ways to become relevant in the midst of the greater context to which it belongs.

This is where strong communities become even more challenging, for a truly strong community can become insular to the world around it; risking irrelevancy in its inward focused patterns of order and behavior.

And for churches, this can be painful, for Churches who deal with fundamental question of life like: Who are we? How are we to live? What is our ultimate purpose? How will we define the life that we are to lead? Who is God?

Jesus says: tread carefully, for this way of living is both high-consequence and high-reward.

Well, if you want to place yourself in the middle of things, try standing in the narthex before and after church. Really, position yourself in the middle. It's one of the highest value places for me as a pastor. In the narthex many words are shared. Sometimes I overhear generous words of gracious welcome; sometimes I see how those words go unshared, and opportunities missed.

Can you remember what it would be like, to be an outsider? You have never been here before, never set foot on this church property, perhaps never been a person of faith. Or maybe you were and carry your own milestones. Maybe you do not look the same or are not as able bodied, or hard of hearing, or come alone and are full of loneliness. Whatever the case, it's an act of courage, and for some, horrifying vulnerably, just to make it in here. And to stay, to become engrafted into a spiritual body, may literally mean severing oneself- from shame, from fear, from anger, from racism, from homophobia, from the past or present confusion. This isn't a metaphor anymore- it can mean concrete loss to become whole, with the Good News.

The narthex, Woodman's, the sidewalk: all great places to become the welcoming and responsible disciples Jesus is instructing us to become. But remember, its high consequence, and high reward.

Keep your eyes open for these opportunities and God's signs of welcoming grace, I know as your pastor I keep my eyes open, but I have yet to see Nueskes cheddar beef sticks on toothpicks for coffee hour.

But I have my hopes- I keep the faith.

I leave you with these words of wisdom today-

“Our Christian growth must be constantly enlarged in sensitivity to the world’s sufferings and sensitivity to the victorious mercy of God. It means that our eyes have to be fully open to the world, to see its dereliction and hopelessness, its godlessness; and it means that we must know in ourselves how God’s mercy breaks barriers, remakes and renews. It is only through such open hearts that God can work. When selfishness and greedy manipulation are set aside, and insensitivity and complacency are overcome, then there is an empty space for the wind of the spirit to blow through. – Rowman Williams

Amen.