



Pentecost 19 – Proper 21 (B)

Discipleship

[RCL]: Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29; Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

O God, the light of the minds which know you, the joy of the hearts which love you, the strength of the wills which try to serve you: Grant us to know you so as to love you, to love you so as to serve you, in whose service is perfect freedom. And since you have called all of us to your service, make us worthy of the calling and empower us for this service. Amen.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” As People of the Way, followers and disciples of Jesus Christ, we understand our responsibility to live this charge from Jesus Christ to his disciples. Discipleship involves prayer, study, and action. Discipleship is the way we take our prayer and study and engage the world in a way that shines the light on the power of love over the things, the people, the systems that deny the fullness of life and living. Anything that denies, prevents, or oppresses individuals and human flourishing is a form of evil that must be resisted and contested. Jesus calls us to co-labor with God and others to heal the world and co-create a just earth.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” What does this mean for us in our context as members of this congregation, members of the Jesus Movement? The Gospel of Mark sheds light on discipleship in the Jesus Movement. “The Peoples’ Bible” provides this commentary on the Gospel of Mark and its relationship to the Jesus Movement: “Of the written stories of Jesus’ mission included in the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark is generally considered to be the earliest. Written outside Palestine, and possibly in Rome, this account is one of the initial writings responsible for carrying the message of the Jesus movement westward, toward Italy.”

Last week, we heard Jesus troubling the disciples’ understanding of greatness. He provided them with a standard of greatness grounded in service in which “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Today, we hear Jesus continue with his concern about the misunderstanding his followers have about discipleship. It begins with the disciples concerned about the actions of an exorcist. John seems to challenge Jesus to confront an exorcist, not a follower of Jesus, for casting out demons. He says,

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Jesus appears to interrupt John midsentence and corrects him and the other disciples. His response undercuts their assumptions about how he would address the situation. Jesus says, “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.”

Jesus is not concerned about the exorcist; he is concerned about the disciples’ misunderstanding of discipleship and their responsibilities in co-laboring with him in God’s work of justice, restoration, and renewal. In telling them not to hinder a person doing ministry in his name, Jesus is challenging the exclusivism of his followers. He directly confronts their belief that they alone can advance the work of healing and transformation – the ministry. Jesus not only says that it’s okay that the exorcist is casting out demons in his name – he instructs them not to stop him.

But Jesus does not stop there. He leans in and underscores the value of co-laboring with others. In doing so, he is confronting John’s belief that he and the other disciples are in positions of privilege. Jesus understands that John feels their positions are threatened by the spiritual actions of an “outsider.” Perhaps you have seen this dynamic play out when individuals become too attached to their own guild or ministry. People sometimes refuse to integrate their efforts, resources, and ministry with others.

Jesus goes on to speak of the reward one receives for the simple act of giving the disciples a cup of water merely because they “bear the name of Christ.” In doing so, he expands the moral imagination of the disciples by juxtaposing the reward one receives for the simple act of extending hospitality through a cup of water in his name with that of contesting evil. Paul Berge suggests Jesus is giving the disciples two important lessons: First, his ministry involves challenging the power of evil. Second, his ministry models love for the neighbor. Berge asserts, “Serving the neighbor is not to gain reward but to live in response to the neighbor and serving out love in the name of Christ.” Placed in context with last week’s Gospel reading, this week’s lesson provides a powerful corrective to the self-seeking of the disciples about greatness and their misplaced exclusive understanding that they alone can act in the name of Jesus to heal the world. It invites us to individually and corporately recognize that we, like John, can fall into the trap of acting from a place of privilege even while performing ministry. It is easy to stumble when the desire to be first, special, or the only one overrides our desire to serve, accompany, and co-labor with others in the name of Jesus.

Imagine how our Christian ministry in the world and fellowship in the congregations of our contemporary contexts would be enriched if we would integrate these teachings into our ways of thinking and being. The Gospel of Mark focuses on the importance of Jesus’ teachings about discipleship and the non-hierarchical, non-exclusive nature of co-laboring with God and our neighbors. It provides us with a roadmap for ministry in the Jesus Movement. Today’s Gospel challenges us to accept the outsider who acts in Jesus’ name and to value the seemingly small and simple gestures of hospitality and radical welcome extended by

others. In his article *The Discipleship Discourse*, Harry Feldermann observes, “Instead of division, each one seeking to be the greatest, there should be acceptance, receiving the child and the outsider” – a powerful message for the church and its members to inwardly digest.

“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.”

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” Amen.

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