

Sunday, September 27, 2015
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 9:38-50

What Are You Looking At?

When I was a little girl, maybe 5 or 6, I remember coming out of a medical building, walking out to the parking lot with my mother, and seeing another person come in, in a wheelchair. This person didn't have any legs. I hadn't seen anything like that before, and I stared. "What are you looking at?" the person said to me, angrily. My mother talked to me later. She said, "That looked different to you, but you shouldn't stare. We don't know what that person has been through." My stare was that of child's curiosity, and concern. I wanted to know how and why this had happened. Looking back, remembering the emotion in the person's voice when they asked me what I was looking at, what my mother said is still true: we don't know what that person has been through, you shouldn't watch like that, shouldn't stare.

The disciples are watching someone at the beginning of today's gospel reading. They see someone, someone doing something different. Then they go to Jesus and tell him about it: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name." There's a watching, an eyes-glued sense to what the disciples are doing. They are grown men, but there is about this the sound of a child staring—and they don't just watch, they talk about it. Maybe there's even a sense of tattling to what they say: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he did not follow us." This comes just after last week's gospel reading, in which the disciples have been confused about what Jesus is saying but have not asked for clarification, and then have argued with one another about who is the greatest. With today's scene and comment, they're not looking all that much better. The disciples see someone do something good, but they take issue with it, because that person didn't do it in a certain way, or a certain order—the order in which the disciples think they should do things.

Jesus, like my mother, gently corrects them. (A least, Jesus is gentle in the first part of today's reading. We'll get to that second part a little later.) When the disciples get stuck staring, Jesus talks with them about what they've seen. Jesus says, "Let's look at what you are saying: This person was casting out demons, offering healing. This person was doing good, and they were doing it in my name. That's a good thing!" Jesus says. "You can't do good, you can't do acts of power in my name, and not be changed by it." What a powerful statement that is! Acts of positive power are transformative—even, it seems, above and beyond one's intentions, or understanding—certainly above and beyond the limitations we set for one another. Maybe this person was doing things differently than the disciples would have done it. That's okay, Jesus says. It's more than okay. If ever there was a story for control freak Christians to take to heart, this is it. (I may be preaching to myself here...) If you have such tendencies, and you want to be part of the healing God brings to the world, remember (Pastor) you can't control the way the power of God is expressed, and by whom. When you see it, don't tattle. See it and celebrate. Like Jesus does. Jesus gives a remarkably sweeping approval for all the various ways that people are part of his mission. Jesus says: "Whoever is not against us, is for us."

What a gracious, what a confident, what an open-armed approach to the world: embracing it. I think we see some of this embrace in a recent holy visitor to the United States, Pope Francis, and in the way people respond to him. Pope Francis is celebrated by Christians of all different names, of all different denominations, and by people who would do not call themselves Christian. Francis himself embodies this kind of welcoming, open-armed grace. What a wonderful pope! (How often has that been said from a Lutheran pulpit since the Reformation?)

What a change from even as recently as when my mother was a child. Back then, she said, heaven forbid that a Lutheran marry a Catholic. That's not the case today. I can tell you my mother is absolutely delighted that my sister married a good and caring Catholic man, and that my mother celebrates the Catholic baptism of my sister's baby boy—a baptism happening just this afternoon up in MN. My newest nephew's middle name is Ignatius.

People express their faith, people experience and share the power of God, in different ways. In our pluralistic, multi-faith world we are every more aware of this. Jesus says, don't stare at others, don't think that being my disciple sanctions sniping disapproval. Don't look at them, look at yourself.

It is here, in the second part of today's gospel reading, that Jesus is not so gentle, and the focus is pointedly person. The word used is "you." First there's the saying about the millstone and little ones, if you prevent a little one from coming to Jesus it's better you drown! And then there's the saying about body parts: "If your hand causes you to sin, or if your foot causes you to sin, or if your eye causes you to sin, cut it off, cut it off, tear it out. Better to not have them, then to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire, to where the worm never dies." That's harsh. And hyperbolic. Jesus is using strong language to make a strong point.

Sadly, in the history of religion, some have taken what Jesus says literally. Even if one has no ear for exaggeration, you have to acknowledge that a literal reading argues against itself. When your hand causes you to sin, it's not only one hand that's involved; we don't steal with a hand tied behind our backs. When your foot causes you to sin, it's not just one foot that's involved, we don't get to places we should not be by hopping. When your eye causes you to sin, when something is visually tempting, when we're glaring or staring or snooping, we don't do it while winking, or wearing an eye patch. The directions are not meant literally—for only one of each paired member is to be amputated, although both were involved in the sin. No, the structural, rhetorical implications of hand, and foot and eye are an ever heightening injunction on self-examination: don't commit sin, don't go anywhere where you may commit sin, don't even think about committing sin.

It's a harshly interior view when you look at it like that, but it's even harsher when we don't. There's a terrible irony to our religious misreadings. I'm not just talking about the absurd idea that amputation is a cure for sin, but of all the ways that religion can be used to wound other people. Perhaps you have heard, perhaps you have been hurt by things people have said with the claim that they are being Christian. Perhaps you have heard some of the misguided, the truly awful things people say under the guise of religious rhetoric. A Lutheran seminary professor I know, a Biblical scholar, has lived most of his life in a wheelchair. When he was a teenager he was diagnosed with bone cancer, and after long and painful treatment attempts, and much suffering, the only way to save his life was to cut off his legs. Some people said to his parents, "What is it you did that God is punishing you?"

That is not the God we know in Jesus. That's not the God that seminary professor knew, when he was little more than a child and he thought he would die. The God he knew then, is a God who knew suffering, a God who wore a body, a God who opens his arms in gracious embrace while hanging on a cross. That is the God that professor grew up to teach others about, to serve with his whole body, his whole self, a witness to the love that God has for the whole world.