

Sunday March 13, 2022
Lesson 2: An Authentic Faith
Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

Context:

In today's lesson, we continue in the book of Mark and marching towards the cross as we read of another conversation where Jesus addresses what it means to be his disciples. We discover what he expects out of his disciples and how to live those traits out as a disciple of Christ. We also learn the human tendency of forming social circles carefully defined with our own standards. For the Christian witness, we are to look for those who do to others as our Lord would have us to do.

The lesson begins the disciples noticing someone else is in the business of healing people in the name of Jesus and the disciples stopping them. When John reveals to Jesus what has happened, Jesus takes the moment to explain how anyone who is not against them is for them. If they are doing good things, it should not be the place of the disciples or Jesus to prevent them from taking care of others.

While we are not explained why John speaks up or why the disciples prevent the outside healer from doing so, we are given an insight to what Jesus is seeking to do with the disciples. Jesus is making clear how in-groups should and should not function. The giving and receiving which characterizes disciples is not to be limited to some in-group but should be common to all who bear the name of Jesus Christ.¹ The disciples should pay attention more to what is being done for others in need.

This story is sandwiched in between a larger illustration where Jesus has taken a little child before the disciples to teach them about the kingdom of God. He continues with this teaching as he dives into commentary about sin and how others can be separated from God. The language is figurative and hyperbolic, vivid and harsh.² He speaks of millstones being placed around peoples' necks and hands being cut off. These illustrations are meant to carry a weight for how the disciples are to live with one another and live their own lives.

He closes with a strange illustration of "everyone being salted with fire" and then goes on to comment on how everyone should be salty. Having salt allows them all to have peace with one another. This allusion is a calling for disciples' lives to be characterized by lowly service and an openness to Christ.³ As a result, the disciples should not be spending their time focusing on what their in-group can do or criticizing those outside their in-group. This is not productive and does not further or contribute to the kingdom. It misses the point and can also harm others in the process. Disciples are called to put the focus on Jesus and service and not themselves and their in-groups.

¹ Williamson Jr., Lamar. "Mark." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 171.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 172.

Application

There is nothing wrong with having an “in-group.” All of us hopefully have a social circle where we find comfort and support. This may include a sports group, a church small group, a neighborhood association, or a group of people we have known our whole lives. In-groups allow us to have people where we can be our most authentic selves and hopefully find strength and encouragement. An in-group can also help us grow with the more challenging aspects of our personality. In-groups can help all people grow and bloom.

Yet there is also a shadow side with in-groups which can play out over time. Whenever in-groups get to a point where there is a superiority complex or believe they are more righteous than others, the in-groups have become staid and stagnant. For Christian communities and Christian in-groups, they can lead to division and portray a bad witness to the world.

In the case of the disciples, their in-group has led them to believe they are the only ones to have a monopoly on the healing done in Jesus’ name. In their defense, it could be natural as they have been together and been up close with Jesus. Yet Jesus patiently shows them how there are multiple people who can do good in the kingdom and there is no one in-group with the magic touch.

I wonder what Jesus would say about some of the in-groups we have in today’s world, especially in the Christian circles we travel in. One example from my own context is how clergy identify with the schools we attended in seminary and when coming back to serve in the conference, we band together. In some ways, it is completely natural as when you go off with others for a few years and then return home, you bond together. You might have had the same professors or the same experiences with a class. There was someone for you when you got a little homesick and couldn’t jump in the car to go home. So of course, when you come back, there is a special connection.

However, I’ve noticed a problem with in-groups, whether it is clergy groups or some other bonding agent. They can turn into groups where we compete or even use to justify unhealthy behaviors. We take things which were meant to bond us together and turn them into competing units. And in the process, we lock each other out and form divisions within the body of Christ.

It is not just the clergy of the Alabama West-Florida Conference though. We’ve all seen how in-groups can lead to us not being the best witnesses for Jesus. We become so focused on self-preservation and appearing a certain way before others, we forget how all people have been made in the image of God.

God can choose anyone God wants to do great things for the kingdom of God regardless of the stipulations we try to place upon them. Scripture is replete with God at work in the life of countless unlikely heroes and heroines. Think of Rahab the prostitute who helped the Israelites or of Saul who went from arresting Christians to recruiting Christians.

Even more so, God warns us of turning people away for whatever reason we define as them not being a part of an in-group. While pointing to a young child as an example, Jesus invites the disciples to think of how they treat and label others. If you think of a child as sweet and innocent, think of how you treat others and remember how this person was once a child too.

In one of my appointments, I once had a very athletic, popular teenager. He was very smooth and well loved by all. He was a jock, the popular kid. He was active in youth and loved learning about the scriptures as well as leading in worship.

Yet my favorite thing about this young man, who by all accounts was a part of every in-group in the community, is the dedication he had to taking care of and supporting the younger

boys in the community. And these were the boys from rough homes and who were lacking in social graces and not in the in-groups. Time and time again, in both the church and in the community, I watched as he would encourage, assist, and support these other young men. He didn't do it for accolades or for recognition. He did it due to the example he had of his parents and of the love he had for Jesus. I can only hope one day to love like he does, reaching all people and following our Lord.

How can in-groups be a good thing for us? When does an in-group become dangerous or bad? Why does Jesus warn the disciples of focusing on welcoming all people who do good instead of people fitting into specific in-groups? Who are the people you look to for guidance about how to accept and love others? What are ways you can accept and love others like Jesus?

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