

“Insiders or Outsiders”

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Psalm 124

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

The gospel lesson that we heard this morning is the sort of scripture passage that gives preachers heartburn and insomnia. There are multiple stumbling blocks in this passage...including reference to what happens if we put stumbling blocks in front of others...and it's not good. So what's the point here? Why is this particular section of Mark an important one for us to hear and ponder? What is Mark trying to tell us about the nature of Jesus' teaching and the instructions to all of us on how to be good disciples?

If we look at all four of the lectionary selections for this morning's worship, we will find a common thread that's worth our time and attention. In the Old Testament lesson from the Book of Esther, we find a Jewish female being held in captivity in a position of power in the king's household where she uses that power to save her people from certain extinction at the hands of those who seek to destroy them. She's not an 'authorized' religious authority even within her own community, but she is the servant of God nevertheless and she does the Lord's bidding even at potential peril to herself. She had no idea that her request for the safety of her own life and the safety of her people as a whole would be granted to her. She could just as easily have been executed for being so far out of bounds with her request. But the end result was the opposite. Her people *were* spared and they *were* set free from their bondage. Generations that followed them would celebrate this miraculous salvation by celebrating the festival of Purim every year. Queen Esther was not a religious leader, but she listened to the word of God and followed as she was led. Never let it be said or believed that God's action in human affairs can happen only through persons deemed by other

persons to have authority. God is the one who grants authority...and it is often outside the chain of command.

In Psalm 124 we hear the words of thanksgiving to God for salvation from the attacks of enemies; from a flood that threatened to sweep them away; and from the teeth of wild animals who would surely have destroyed them. The psalmist offers up acknowledgement that their help is in the name of the Lord...the one who made heaven and earth. The psalmist is expressing the sentiments of an entire community, not just his own sentiments. The ones offering up their thanksgivings are not religious authorities, but ordinary people...just like you and me... who have come together to worship the God who created them. The psalmist not only expresses thanksgiving for protection, but also makes a statement about the confidence the people have in God and in God's grace and salvation.

When we turn to the letter of James to the young and struggling church we hear some equally familiar themes. In all circumstances, he says, we are to acknowledge God and even give thanks to God for these circumstances. Prayers of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up. James is talking not only about acknowledgement of the Lord, but of confidence his hearers have in God's presence in their lives and God's ultimate desire for the welfare of each of them. James reminds them to pray and to pray often and to pray fervently and enthusiastically. Notice that James does *not* say that those who pray need to have special authority from the community to do so. He reminds them that the prayers of the righteous are powerful, but he does not say that the prayers of those with authority are powerful. Righteousness is a right relationship with God...and those who are righteous, whether they have human bestowed authority or not, are the ones who have a powerful connection with God.

We arrive then at the gospel selection from Mark this morning. True to form, Mark has Jesus saying some outrageous things, so let's see if we can decipher what Jesus is actually telling his disciples and us. This scene occurs just after Jesus has returned from Mt. Tabor and the earth-shattering experience of the

Transfiguration...which Peter, James, and John witnessed. When they rejoin the other disciples, they learn that the disciples were distressed because they hadn't been able to exorcise a demon from a young boy. Jesus did so immediately and the disciples asked Jesus why they had not been able to cast out the demon. Jesus' answer was that such a thing could be done only with prayer. Apparently, they had not prayed first!

And then he tells them what's going to happen to him when they get to Jerusalem. It's such a horrible image that they can't take it in, so Jesus turns his attention to the quarreling that had been going on among them on their walk to Capernaum. Jesus wants to know what they had been talking about on that walk. Actually, they had been jockeying for position...trying to determine which one of them was the greatest. This is another teaching moment for Jesus. He explains that whoever wants to be first must be willing to be last of all and the servant of all. And Jesus wraps his arms around a small child...a human being with no resources; a human being with no agency or power; a human being completely dependent upon others for his welfare. And Jesus tells them...and us...that if they want to be great, they will welcome people who are like this child. A child is by definition an 'outsider.' A child belongs in the community by virtue of his heritage, his family, and his parents. He is no one without them and yet, along the way, Jesus and his followers meet many people who are by the definition of their time 'no one.' The ones Jesus embraces...the ones Jesus touches...the ones Jesus heals...are the ones that others consider to be outsiders.

When some unknown group of others cast out a demon in Jesus' name, the disciples are indignant. They have no right!! They aren't followers of Jesus! They are outsiders!! How dare they? But Jesus reminds his followers that if they aren't against Him, they are ultimately for him. They will speak well of Jesus even if they are *not* then followers of his. And who knows, they may become followers because of their own experience with healing. The fact that someone is not expressly trying to stop you from doing something is tacit approval. They aren't working against you. According to the disciples following Jesus, those other people casting out demons in Jesus' name are outsiders. Jesus didn't think so. Jesus' instruction to his followers was to acknowledge that if they weren't

working against Jesus and his followers then they were in favor of Jesus and his followers. They were allowing them...without interference...to pursue the good works Jesus had sent them to do.

But even as Jesus models for them...and for us...who to embrace, Jesus also warns us about jeopardizing our own salvation. Jesus cautions them that if they put a stumbling block in front of someone else...if they cause someone else to fall from grace...especially ones like this little child that Jesus is still holding...their retribution will be horrible. Jesus says, "It would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Now Jesus doesn't describe what might be a stumbling block. It could be any number of things that we might not even consider to be stumbling blocks. What if...in our enthusiasm and our desire for our children to do well in the world...we inadvertently teach them to cut corners or encourage competition with others with such enthusiasm that we diminish their own humanity and the humanity of the one with whom they compete? What if, in our passion for our children to do well, we actually put stumbling blocks before them? What if we encourage them subtly or overtly to do whatever they need to do to secure the prize for themselves? Is this not a stumbling block in their relationship with God?

So very often the references to 'sin' in the Bible are related to sexual matters, but there are many other kinds of sins to which we can all fall prey. Any desires or temptations to take actions outside our acknowledgement and worship of God are the stumbling blocks that will keep us from the love of God. Mark speaks in horrific hyperbole when he talks about cutting off a foot or a hand rather than ending up in hell. Or tearing out an eye if it causes us to stumble. These outrageous and potentially dangerous instructions are designed to catch our attention and our imaginations and they succeed in doing just that. Stumbling blocks...those things that prevent us from righteous living and an awareness of our dependence on God and our awareness of God's love for us...those stumbling blocks are to be respected for being extremely dangerous and they are to be avoided at all cost. At the end of this warning, Jesus reminds them that what is worthless will be destroyed in the end, but what is good will be preserved as salt

preserves. So he warns them not to jockey for position with one another; not to create insiders and outsiders; not to put themselves forward or be a rival with anyone else in their community, but they are to speak judiciously and graciously to and about one another. They are to care for one another. There are no outsiders in those who are following Jesus...then or now. Jesus charges them...and us...to love one another as He has loved each of them and as He loves each of us.

It's such a great temptation to assume that if someone else does not envision Jesus the same way we do or does not worship Jesus in the same way we do or does not follow the same liturgy that we do or go by the same rules about following Jesus that we do...that somehow, we are on the inside...lined up correctly with Jesus...and they are on the outside. That's a very dangerous and false assumption. It's quite likely that each one of us know people who follow Jesus more closely than we do...in caring for others, in honesty, in respect, and in acknowledging and living out their love for God. Jesus charged us to love one another...not just because we saw everything the same way...but because Jesus told us that we were to love one another...period.

In Jesus Christ there are no insiders or outsiders. Every human being is precious in God's eyes.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.