

Mark 9: 38-50 "Stumbling Blocks" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/30/18

When I was 6 years old, we moved from the small town of Lebanon, Oregon to the booming metropolis of Wichita, KS. It was one of the biggest cities my family had ever lived in as my dad took a position on the Christian Church regional staff. We began the task of adjusting to big city life, to the passing train which shook our house at night, to people from all nationalities and races, and to the Midwest storms. More than once I have shared that the definition of a storm, according to a Midwesterner, is where rain flows horizontal, not vertical, knocking you off your feet. I used to say that these storms were nothing like the tame events Californians called "storms" ... until Redding got hit by a "F3 fire-nado" and now I am giving up on comparisons. I couldn't wait to start first grade where my school was only about 4 blocks away. After the first few weeks, my parents finally let me walk on my own to school and I felt so grown-up. Until one morning, a man standing behind his screen door called out to me. I couldn't see him very well and he asked me to come closer. I told him I needed to get to school but he assured me it wouldn't take long. He had a problem he needed help with. My parents had always taught me to be polite and receptive to my elders and it would be rude not to help. So I went inside. Instantly, I knew something wasn't right. I will not go into detail except to say I was one of the lucky ones. I now know it could have been much worse. When I got to school late and explained to the teacher how I tried to help, she very wisely called the principal, my parents and then the police. The man was arrested and that is all we know about it. To this day, I still remember what he looked like, what his house looked like, but I cannot begin to tell you what my principal, teacher, or house looked like as we moved shortly thereafter. Memory is an odd thing. We do not talk about it in my family for fear of upsetting my mother who still blames herself, but I am learning to talk about it with others and release the shame, grief, and

anger. Times like this week bring it back to the surface as has happened with so many women and men who have been abused. Times like this week find us searching for a healing perspective to embrace, a hopeful step to be taken, a gentle touch to be experienced.

What we are given in such a time is some very graphic, even grotesque images from Jesus about becoming stumbling blocks and being at odds with one another. Jesus uses imagery which even the most literal Bible reader must ask whom is Jesus talking to in this passage and what is his purpose? Is he speaking literally or figuratively? Jesus is coming down hard on his followers, but does he mean to really come down this hard? Surely this is an over-the-top exaggeration— he doesn't really mean to cut off your foot or hand or tear out your eye, does he? It's just a form of shock therapy, right? Those who read the Bible literally are fine dismissing this text as symbolic exaggeration, but are adamant about far more ambiguous Gospel texts as being inerrant and infallible just because they are less extreme. But that is a slippery slope, isn't it? Jesus didn't really intend what he said, he didn't mean to be that strict with his disciples. Once we cast off Jesus' so-called hyperboles, it is all too comfortable to reject his primary point as well. A reminder that a hyperbole is defined as an "exaggerated statement or claim not meant to be taken literally." Karoline Lewis says that to read this text as a hyperbole takes us down a rabbit hole from which it is hard to extract ourselves. All of sudden, we are debating the meaning of hyperbole rather than paying attention to its function. We start dancing around biblical literalism, around details of what a house looks like, whether one is afraid to fly on planes, and so on, versus what truth is being revealed. The significance of the claim to which the hyperbole is pointing gets lost in the details. We need to remember that the function of a hyperbole is to magnify what is at stake. It shouldn't be so easily dismissed

because it points to truth, a truth that must be heard and taken seriously. We need to hear this truth, even when it is uncomfortable, even when it is hard to talk about with our family, our children, strangers and those who come after us.

Jesus provides the truth we need to hear when his disciples say to him, “We saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t in our group.” They are knee deep in judgment and Jesus’ response is packed with enough wisdom to carry over multiple Sundays. Jesus says, “Umm, no. That is not how this works. That is not how living God’s way works. And I know what you want to do next – you want to put a stumbling block in their way. Not only do you want to call them out, you want to make sure they fall. Seal the deal, that is what you want to do.” One of the saddest things I saw this week was this tendency being played out on both sides of the aisle. In both political parties, many were so focused on the downfall of the other, that they had lost sight of the larger truth, the grander design of democracy and justice which our country was founded upon. Jesus is saying to us, “Don’t you dare criticize one who isn’t of your group just because they hold different beliefs, different practices. Don’t get in their way, don’t mess with them, because if they use my name to do something good and powerful, they are not an enemy but an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it, that God will notice.”

We get so focused on the “other.” I know I do – I used to dread meeting up with folks from high school, college and seminary. I didn’t want to be reminded of how successful they had become, what big homes they owned, what big, famous churches they were serving, how many of them were now well-known across state and denominational lines because of their contributions to the faith community. I got caught in that comparison game in which I never

measured up. It was Dave Downing who reminded me to stop comparing myself to others, to let go of all the judgment, competition, and expectation and just be me. I share the same good news with you. There is no one else quite like you – Count on it. You are the salt of the earth so focus on that unique flavoring that is you, and be the best you that you can be. Deal with yourself first and give up on the distractions and comparisons.

Jesus is talking to those who fracture the world between the good and the bad, the Muslim and the Christian, the Democrat and the Republican, the liberal and the conservative as he says stop being distracted by the “other” as your enemy. We are all on this planet together, we are all in the same proverbial boat, and we need to stick together for the sake of camaraderie and collegiality, and ultimately for the sake of our children, our children’s children, and so on. Going back to those horrific images of self-mutilation, Brian McLaren points to the idea that our enemy is not over there somewhere, not across the aisle, but inside of us. Your enemy is in you, specifically, within your perceptions towards the world, your world view, thus, your eyes. If your eyes tell you the one across the room is your enemy because he doesn’t agree with you politically, then get rid of that perspective. Count on it - your enemy is within. If you are motivated towards ill will against another, if your feet have been put in motion towards abuse, neglect, assault, aggravated competition, then cut that motivation out of your life. Count on it - your greatest enemy is not over there somewhere, it is within your own tendencies to let your hands do the speaking for what is important in your life. If your hands silence others, if they elicit laughter at the expense of others, then remove that hand from doing what it is doing. Change your actions, adjust your words so that they no longer are a stumbling block to someone else. Stop getting distracted by the behaviors of others and start

focusing on your own. Count on it. Jesus put it something like this: “Don’t take the splinter out of your neighbor’s eye until you take the log out of your own.” Being accountable for our actions is not a bad thing if we realize it is not about shame or blame, it is about changing the things we can and finding peace about what cannot; it is about coming to understand ourselves, and in doing so, hopefully coming to understand beyond ourselves. And for those who’ve survived abuse, it’s about finding movements that are motivating, discovering actions that are empowering, and claiming perspectives which are healing. Only then will our feet, hands, and eyes no longer be stumbling blocks to those who come after us. Count on it.