

“Flirt”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Mark 9:38-50

When I start to get tied up in knots, my best friend tells me to get over myself. I need that, and it helps. Each of us, from time to time, gets to that place where something just eats us alive: the person that gets under your skin, like a tick you can’t pull out; the awkward moment where we wonder what someone meant when they said that, or wish we had a do-over, because what we said didn’t come out quite right. Once we do get over it, we feel better and a little silly, but when we do feel silly, we need to remember that it happens to everyone, including the disciples.

I don’t mean to harp on them week after week, but Mark does chapter after chapter, because he wants us to learn from what they did wrong and do better, because we ought to know better. Mark lays into the disciples again and again to make a point, and it’s less about them and more about us. They lived before the resurrection. We live after it. We know how the story ends in a way they could not. They had a decent excuse for not getting it. We don’t.

In this week’s episode, they got tied up in knots about somebody casting out demons in Jesus’ name. This guy wasn’t following Jesus, at least not in the way the disciples thought he should. They tried to shut him down, but he didn’t stop, so John brought it to Jesus in hopes that he’d do what they couldn’t. It’s almost a replay of last week’s episode.

Previously on the Gospel of Mark, the disciples tried to cast out a demon, but it wouldn’t budge. Jesus got there, said a prayer, and boom – demon gone. It was, Jesus explained, a rather strong demon, but I doubt that helped much. **In public**, the disciples came up empty, were seen as weak, and what’s more, they’d cast out demons before. Had they lost their touch? This led

them to fight over which of them was top dog, and now this guy is out there doing what they couldn't, and that had to feel bad.

“So make him stop, Jesus. He's not one of us.” But Jesus told them to leave him alone. “That's hard work, and he's good at it. You can't do it if you're not for me, because that type of power comes only from me. What's-his-face doesn't need your permission or approval – just mine; just God's. And obviously he's got it, because he's got it. Just look at those people he's freed from their demons, the people he untied out of their knots.”

Jesus went on to say, in so many words, “Stay out of his way, because when you try to block somebody from me, that's your worst day. That's the day you cease to be who you are meant to be, like salt that tastes like nothing. That's the day you might as well take a big stone, tie a rope on it, loop the rope around your neck, and jump into the sea. The day you try to keep people from me, because you think they don't qualify, that's the day you need to get rid of whatever it is that makes you do that.”

Jesus used gruesome images, stuff straight out of the Saw movies. Gouge out your eyes. Chop off your hand. Lop off your foot. Sounds bad, but it's good for us, because if we don't purge the things that cause us to push people away from Jesus, our lives will be hellish. How could it not be? When pride and envy fill our hearts, it burns. That warmth is pleasant for a while, but eventually it consumes us. When we get selfish, we get godless, because we've put what we want ahead of what God wants. When we get petty, we get puny.

Now it's hard to see how we push people away from Jesus. It's not like we pray, “Jesus, please shut those guys down. They make us look bad, feel bad, and they are bad, because they don't follow you in the same way we do.” Maybe some churches do pray that. Maybe some people pray that about us. But that's not how we pray.

We don't ignore people, at least not on purpose. We welcome them with open hearts, and that's not a slogan. That's a reality here at St. Luke's. We don't judge, at least not on purpose, on the basis of rich or poor, old or young, Ph.D. or GED; fancy dress or beach wear, we don't care. Just wear clothes, and everybody'll be fine. Now if what I'm describing doesn't match with your experience, I need you to tell me, because that means we've got some serious work to do, and we'll die if we don't. But to the extent my sense of our parish is accurate, we need to celebrate who we are, guard against complacency, and give God thanks for the grace that keeps us focused on the only standard that matters. Will you join us sinners in seeking forgiveness? Will you join us in helping each other put God first in our lives?

But we're not immune to the knots and demons that tie us up and tie us down. Nobody is. Everyone's vulnerable. We've got stuff to get over. We need to get over ourselves and find that piece that pushes people away from Jesus and get rid of it. It'll hurt. We might miss what we cut off, but we'll stay salty, maybe get saltier. But what it is? That's something we need to reflect on and discuss, but maybe we can make a modest start today

Our minds go first to the usual suspects and stereotypes. Our hide-bound traditional worship, complicated, mystifying for the uninitiated. That seems like an unfair caricature to me. Yes, our liturgy isn't appealing to everyone, but that's true of every type of worship that is or ever was.

I grew up Methodist and started worshipping with the Episcopal Church at age 19, because I was looking for something. My first Eucharist was a beautiful nightmare. I loved the preaching, the music, the sense of rhythm and reverence, but what is all this bowing and crossing? When do I sit or stand or kneel? Are push-ups next? And what in the name of all

that's holy is an S-hymn and where do you find it? (Those are in the front of the hymnal, in case you need to know.) The next week, I brought numbered bookmarks and eventually figured it out.

Can we expand our range of worship, make it more accessible to a wider swath of people, and honor our heritage all at the same time? Yes, we can, and we will. But we don't have to reduce worship to entertainment to be popular, and if that is the price of popularity, I think it's too expensive.

Some deride our baffling code: sacristy, Vestry, liturgy, Rector, Eucharist, diocese, the list goes on – outdated nonsense that serves only to confuse and exclude. But what some dislike, others treasure, and these terms, which are hundreds or in some cases thousands of years-old root us in the history of our faith. We shouldn't underestimate people's curiosity, their hunger to learn, if we're prepared to teach them.

Now this may sound defensive coming from a priest, especially a convert, because converts make the worst zealots, and truth be told, being defensive is what we need to get rid of, but not in the way you might think.

We tend to be shy about sharing our faith. We don't want to risk being obnoxious or offensive. We want to avoid being embarrassed or rejected. We know that some people are uninterested or even hostile to our faith, and what we don't know in many cases is who will react how. So instead of taking initiative, we go on the defensive and stay silent. But how does that push people away from Jesus?

Strictly speaking, it doesn't. But look at it this way. You can pull people toward Jesus, push them away, or do nothing and hope for the best. But the result of pushing and nothing are roughly the same. There are differences. Pushing is active, intentional, and hurtful. Nothing is passive but neglectful, and neglect causes harm, too. So if we're not pulling, for all intents and

purposes, we're pushing. Leaving somebody in a spiritual desert isn't that much better than forcing them into it, because the result is roughly the same. They're going to starve and die of thirst out there.

We need to lop off our defensiveness, because our silence keeps Jesus secret, and that keeps people away from him just as effectively as if we pushed them away. But there's something else that's got to come off before we can emerge from behind our defensive silence: the idea that we don't know what or how.

Some people think they don't know the gospel story well enough to share it with another person, but for most people, that's simply not true. You don't have to be able to quote the Bible chapter and verse to plant the seed in somebody that Jesus loves them. In fact, spouting chapter and verse may be the least effective form of evangelism. Nobody likes being hit over the head with a shovel. Take your time. Look for the opening. The Spirit will tell you what to say. And if you really don't have a clue, part of my work here is to coach you on the story. That's the what.

Here's the how. Don't get tied up in knots about it. Get over yourself. It needn't be some deadly serious thing. If you've ever flirted with someone, whether in earnest or just for fun, you know **how** to share the story. Flirt for Jesus, in his name. That's how you let somebody know that Jesus loves them. Flirt for Jesus, and have fun with it. Amen.