### “Whoever Is Not Against Us” by S. Finlan, at First Church

September 30, 2018

**James 5:13–16, 19–20**

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. . . .

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

**Mark 9:38–43**

38 John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”39But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. 40Whoever is not against us is for us. 41For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42 “If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to [judgment].

I find four very different principles laid out in the gospel passage. Each one is important, and I will take them in order, then see if I can find any continuity between them.

First is the question: Who has the authority to teach in Jesus’ name? It turns out that this is the wrong question. It’s not a matter of *authority*, but of permission, and anyone who is not *against* Jesus has permission! What a surprise for the apostles! They want to *silence* this independent teacher, but Jesus tells them not to, and not even to judge him. In fact, he is “*for* us”; he is forJesus.They are to leave him alone. Jesus stands for freedom of religious expression, and he seems to assume that people can make up their own minds. It sounds remarkably Protestant, really, anticipating Roger Williams by centuries!

The apostles must be flustered. Jesus rejects their plan to suppress the teacher. Church leaders through the ages have not known what to do with this passage. They mostly ignore it, and secretly reject it. Jesus is giving a huge *permission*, much greater than church leaders have usually been willing to give. We should allow people to preach in Jesus’ name, and let the judgment of *time* prevail, as to whether these teachers are worthy or not. This does not mean that preachers should have license to commit crimes, especially a crime like child abuse. That must be prosecuted, and swiftly.

But, when it comes to people healing and teaching in Jesus’ name, he says “whoever is not against us is for us.” Let them be.

At the end of this story he adds the principle: “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (9:41). This is one of several passages where Jesus links salvation not with *faith*, but with *deeds*. The person who is gaining the reward gains it because of an act of kindness. Good deeds really matter, and they *do* contribute to salvation.

Over the last several weeks, we’ve been reading passages where James says we must “be *doers* of the word,” and “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 1:22; 2:17). Wisdom includes “good fruits” (3:17), such as “to care for orphans and widows” (1:27). Faith matters, too, but good deeds *demonstrate* the existence of faith.

The next Gospel passage returns to the theme we saw last week, of honoring the child, but states it even more emphatically, saying that anything that misleads or hinders a child—a “stumbling block”—is a terrible sin. Jesus is saying that you must treat children with respect and with an attitude of helping. Jesus’ tender affection for children is remarkable and *new*, in the whole history of the major world religions. No other religious figure is so well-known for raising the dignity of children, and of being beloved by children. God is good. Jesus showed that!

The final verse in this reading makes another point. It says if something is a stumbling block for *you*, if something hinders or misleads *you*, you should cut that thing out of your life. This is also a sanity test. If you are overly literal-minded, you’ll be chopping off your hands, or plucking your eyes out. It should be obvious, to those who understand figurative language, that he is not talking about *literally* cutting your hand off, but about cutting off something in your *life* that is hindering you.

It ends with the word I’ve translated “judgment.” The Greek word is *Gehenna*. This refers to a valley south of Jerusalem, where the prophet Jeremiah said God would punish sinners (19:7). Jesus uses *Gehenna* to mean simply “judgment.” However, some early Christians expanded this mean a kind of hell, and inserted verses about this into Mark, verses that have now been removed from many Bibles, such as the NIV. There is much more to say about this, but let’s leave it aside for now, and return to the four main points in the gospel reading.

First we learn that Jesus gives permission to some unknown person who is working in his name. Let him be, Jesus says. Then he says that whoever gives a cup of water in his name will not lose their reward; good-hearted deeds can win salvation for someone, with no mention of their beliefs. Both of these emphasize divine *generosity*. Next he insists that no one put a stumbling block in front of a child. This also stresses generosity or kindness. Finally there’s the principle that if something in your life is spiritually harmful to you, cut it off. So that’s spiritual focus or purpose.

I see generosity, kindness, and spiritual focus as the line of continuity through all these parts. This emphasis was possibly *too generous*, too gentle, for one group of early Christians, and they took Jesus’ remark about “judgment” and attached a harsh afterlife punishment concept to it. But Jesus was emphasizing who will *not* lose their reward. You can see that Jesus’ emphasis is on tolerance, kindness, and focus. It is not just soft and gentle; there is also a firm demand to be spiritually focused.

So stay focused; be serious about your spiritual walk, but trust that God is kind, not cruel, and is tolerant of those who mean well. Show the good fruits of your faith by caring for the vulnerable people. And give a cup of water to someone because of Jesus. You will not lose your reward.