

Mark 9:38-50 “Inspiration from an Unauthorized Exorcist.”

What a ... peculiar passage, right? Y'all tell me when you've have had it with me inflicting psychic whiplash on you ever week, okay? “One week it's, The End, the next week it's The Beginning. One week it's Law and the other week it's Grace. Up-down-up-down-up-down. Make up your mind pastor!” But one of the challenging aspects about following Jesus is that we just can't ignore these difficult passages. In fact, we *need* to study them because Jesus *requires* us to look at scripture with new eyes. Then we can see *life* with new eyes too. The passage I just read is one of those moments in the story of Jesus where he seems to “snap.” Not “snap” like having a momentary psychotic break or anything, but “snap” like how you might say something shocking to get someone's attention. Especially when you think that person isn't listening. I do something that my family absolutely hates, but it sort of illustrates the point. Maybe those of you who've ever been parents can relate to this. I don't know. Tell me if this sounds familiar -

You're in a hurry because you need to be somewhere in five minutes, so as you're scrambling to get out of the house, you tell your kids who are lounging around in the living room on their phones, watching a movie, or playing a game, “I need you to vacuum the living room and clean the bathroom before our guests arrive this evening.” You head out the door, come back home and none of it is done. So you say, “Hey, I told you to vacuum and clean. Why didn't you do it?” What do you think they're likely to say? “We didn't hear you.” Three of you were there, but *nobody heard?! And then there are other times when you give them instructions but you're not sure whether they were listening, so you repeat yourself. Now what do you suppose they'll say? “We heard you,” usually accompanied by an irritated eye-roll. So one of the habits that I developed is saying something outrageous to see if they're really listening. My favorite is, (and please pardon me because this sounds really bad for a pastor to say), “And then I think I'll go sacrifice some goats to Satan.” If they aren't really listening, they won't say anything. If they were only half-listening they'll say, “What!? Why would you do*

that?!” If they were listening, they’ll say, “We heard you dad,” usually followed by, “No need to be weird.”

This passage from Mark is an example of one of the many occasions where Jesus said something radically and deliberately provocative to get his disciples’ attention. In our Thursday night Bible study a couple of weeks ago, we talked about how Jesus did this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel. Speaking of Bible study, the first rule of *responsible* Bible study, especially when you’re dealing with a difficult text, is to understand the context. When you don’t know the context, you can come to some unhealthy and dangerous conclusions when it comes to the point Jesus was trying to get across. In our scripture from Mark’s gospel this morning, it’s important to know that it took place right in the middle of a long string of events where Jesus’ disciples were acting clueless about everything that was going on around them. At the end of chapter 8, Jesus had to scold Peter because Peter got mad at Jesus for predicting his death and resurrection. Jesus didn’t say anything about sacrificing goats, but he did *call* Peter Satan for this! Then chapter 9 starts out with Jesus having to deal with James, Peter, and John who wanted to build a temple on a hill so they could just be in God’s presence all the time without having to deal with all the “messy” people down in the valley. Jesus had to tell them, “These ‘messy’ people are why I’m here in the first place. Get back down the hill and get to work.” Then the disciples got caught up in a situation where they couldn’t cast a demon out a boy, so Jesus had to intervene and tell them that they needed to actually pray before they tried to cast out demons. Then the disciples were arguing about who Jesus liked best and who was the greatest among the disciples. Jesus had to tell them that whoever wants to be first must be last and that in order to follow him, they had to welcome Jesus as one would welcome a child.

Now let’s take a pause here and catch our breath. Knowing all of this ... knowing how much Tom-foolery that Jesus has had to deal with in such a short period of time, can you understand why Jesus might get a little snappy with his disciples? “Oh, what do you mean? Jesus was the

epitome of patience ... he'd never get upset with anyone!" Skip over to chapter 11 and read about what he does when he discovers money changers in the temple! That's a story for another day, but let me tell you, it got pretty wild. What we have in front of us today starts out with the disciples complaining about someone casting out demons in Jesus name. Jesus' attitude seems to be, "Yeah? So?" And believe me, I can see why the disciples might be upset over this. They were Jesus' closest followers, and they couldn't even cast a minor-league demon out of a little boy. So here's this guy who isn't even one of them ... this "other" is out there casting demons out *in Jesus' name!* Who does he think he is? This is where I think Jesus reached the end of his rope dealing with his disciples' shenanigans. "Listen, if the guy isn't against us, then he's for us." Now what this scripture doesn't mention here is the possibility that one or all of the disciples rolled their eyes after Jesus gave this "unauthorized exorcist" a bye. Because if this passage *did* mention an eye-roll, we wouldn't be questioning the next 8 verses and wondering if Jesus took delight in or condoned mafia-style executions, dismemberment and self-mutilation.

So let's see how this disturbing passage sounds if we started verse 42 with the phrase, "You guys just don't get what it means to be my disciples do you?" See, if we would have started reading from way back in 8:27, this would be implied already and we would see the sad progression of the disciples' cluelessness and maybe understand Jesus' frustration a little more. But the lectionary plops us right in the middle of this whole mess, so we have to consider the context. So let me paraphrase our passage today in a way that acknowledges the built-up frustration from the last chapter and a half –

Again we'll start out ... "You guys just don't get what it means to be my disciples do you? These children who are here with us now? The ones I told you have a better handle on what it means to come to me? The ones who set the example of how *you* should receive *me*? Listen, if any of you cause one of these kids to stumble because you can't handle someone else being able to cast out demons in my name when you

can't? You might as well just go hang a millstone around your neck and jump in the sea. In fact, if your own hand causes *you* to stumble, then *you* might as well cut it off. Same goes for your foot. Oh, just in case that doesn't make things clear, how about gouge your eye out while you're at it. Better to go around with one eye than to have two and be thrown into hell where the fire is never quenched. And while we're on the subject of fire ... *everyone* will be salted with fire. But if you aren't salty what kind of good do you expect to accomplish? So if you've got the salt to do it, here's what I want you to do: Go out, be at peace with one another and quit arguing about who's greatest, who can and can't heal people, and what you think is "fair." We've got better things to do.

Doesn't that just change the whole tone of this passage? See how it shifts the emphasis? Now it has very little to do with Jesus sounding like he's suggesting that if you're a Sunday School teacher, you better make sure you have your lesson right or else you'll be sentenced to death or dismemberment! And believe me, I've heard people interpret it this way too! And some churches wonder why they have a hard time recruiting Sunday School teachers! See, Jesus had an established relationship with his disciples. He had some clear expectations for them as his disciples, but it seemed like they just kept getting it wrong! So he had to say some tough-to-hear things to get their attention.

Here's where I think the lesson applies to the church -- We are *not* always going to get it right when it comes to our faith and practice. We're going to mess up. And most of the time, Jesus is very patient. We are, after all, only human. But he's also going to challenge us when it seems like we're not understanding or even *listening*. That's something we *are* encouraged to do as a church family as we seek new ways of living out our faith and witness.