

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/29/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, September 29th	Mark 9:38-50
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Christian refugees

This week's Gospel text offers a concentration of moral discipleship teachings that among other things speak to a phenomenon we see in our time – Christian refugees. The greatest source of Christian refugees is not some war-torn region of the world but the local church.

Mark 9:38-50 Commentary

It is helpful to remember that this week's text is positioned within a block of text emphasizing the spiritual blindness of Jesus' disciples and where a recurring pattern is evident: Each time Jesus attempts to explain the nature of His Messiahship to His disciples, they appear to be completely clueless, confused or just resistant. They continue to understand Jesus as a worldly messiah who will rid them of the Romans. Jesus then clarifies, often graphically, what He expects from His disciples. Within this broader textual pattern and theme, this week's text is argued by some to involve a classic Markan intercalation or sandwiching of units that includes some of last week's text (vv.33-37):

Narrative 1 (9:33-37): Disciples argue over who is the greatest. Jesus presents the Kingdom's standard of greatness where anyone who would be first must be last of all and servant of all. He uses a small child (of less status than a slave) to represent greatness is receiving such in Jesus' name.

Narrative 2 (9:38-41): Disciples adopt an elitist, in-group attitude when an exorcist outside of their group produces mighty works of the Spirit through the authority of Jesus' name.

Narrative 1 Continued (9:42-50): Warnings to those who would cause any little one (of lowly status) who believes in Jesus to stumble (sin).

The possible implications of this intercalation are discussed later.

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." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

Jesus is still sat down teaching the twelve (9:35). Perhaps Peter is still smarting from his rebuke from Jesus (8:33) since it is John, another member of Jesus' inner circle, who acts as a spokesperson for the group. John reports

how they observed someone casting out demons in Jesus' name who was not following them. Notice the wording – John did not say the exorcist was not “following you.” The twelve tried to stop him because he did not belong to the twelve or even the extended group of disciples. They – the “official” disciples – failed to cast out the demon from the boy in 9:14-29 and now also fail to stop the “unofficial” disciple from successfully casting out demons. The disciples see a work of the Spirit done in the name of Jesus and yet oppose it on matters of group membership and identity. We are reminded of earlier in Mark how the scribes oppose the work of the Spirit working through Christ by attributing it to Beelzebub (3:22). There is also a similar incident in the Old Testament when Moses selected seventy men from the elders whom God then gave the gift of prophecy. Eldad and Medad were not among the seventy, but also prophesied. Joshua called Moses to stop the two men. Moses' response was: *“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”* (Numbers 11:29)

Three statements follow each beginning with “for” (*gar*). First, Jesus uses reason – anyone who can produce a work of the Spirit by the authority of His name is hardly an enemy. Moreover, the exorcist having invoked Jesus' name cannot then later speak against Him. The second “for” statement excludes any middle ground. Anyone who is not against Jesus and His disciples is for them. This exorcist is not against us therefore leave him alone. The third “for” statement involves an act towards a disciple by an outsider to the group. A simple act of kindness done to a disciple because they belong to Christ will be rewarded by God and thus even such modest action is appropriate. There is a similarity here to last week's text, *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me”* (v.37).

Christ thus has a much more open-minded attitude to those supportive of His mission but acting outside of the disciples' way of doing church. While the zealotry, or perhaps jealousy, of the disciples caused them to attempt to narrow the circle, Christ widens it.

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

These verses stress the grave penalty (with much overstatement/hyperbole) for causing new or weaker believers (*little ones who believe in me*) to stumble (sin).

⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’

[Note: Some manuscripts add vv. 44 and 46 which are identical to v.48.]

The references to hell in these verses use the Greek word *Gehenna*, the destination of the wicked. It is also a form of the word Hinnom which was the name of a ravine outside Jerusalem which was the site of fire worship and child sacrifices by King Ahaz. With such an unclean past it became the place where the trash of Jerusalem was burned. The quoted phrase of *“where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”* (v.48) is from the closing verses of Isaiah (66:24). These are all graphic images of the consequences of sin. Note these verses apply to believers.

⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

These appear to be three independent statements that all bear reference to salt. Salt and fire represent are metaphors for the trials and persecutions of the disciples. Pure salt always has value. When salt becomes mixed with other elements it loses its saltiness and is thus useless. It may still look like salt but is salt in name only. This is a metaphor for a disciple who becomes contaminated with the world's values. Disciples should be salty in faith and be the moral preservative in their world. A disciple in name only is useless. Conflict was present in the early church and is present in the church today. Disciples must be at peace with each other.

Reflection and Application

Within this section of intense moral teachings, a theme emerges and is perhaps given a greater emphasis by the possible intercalation referenced earlier. There are grave penalties for causing "little ones" to stumble and sin. Behaviors such as arguing who is the greatest in worldly terms or attempting to be elitist about the Kingdom by putting up walls and barriers based on group identity are specifically given as examples. The problems stem from when disciples pursue worldly status or when the church becomes adulterated with the world and loses its distinctiveness.

One does not have to go far within our society to find Christian refugees. Most associate this term with some war-torn region of the world but the biggest source of Christian refugees in our midst is the local church. The phenomenon of church refugees refers to Christians who have given up on the traditional church and continue to practice their faith in smaller groups outside of traditional church membership. However, Christian refugees have given up on their faith altogether because of their experiences of church. This phenomenon is not limited to a few people at the extremities. Based on national survey data, people are leaving the church in droves and whole denominations are on the verge of disappearing. While there are other factors behind these statistics, those still inside the church are challenged by this text to reflect on what individual and corporate actions are causing the little ones to stumble.

Such stumbling blocks can involve the whole spectrum between legalism at one extreme and complete license at the other. Failing to live out the Gospel is perhaps the biggest stumbling block of all. While such Christian refugees may be "little ones" relative to their faith, they are sophisticated enough to recognize hypocrisy when they see it. Mark's Gospel has already told us how Jesus' family is expansive (Mark 3:31-35). He has sheep in many folds (John 10:16). Mark's Gospel also reminds us how sometimes our church traditions can become so elevated in importance the church can teach human commandments as though doctrine from God (Mark 7:1-23). When there is no difference between a church and the world around it, why join? There are many more competing private social clubs that satisfy similar needs where membership is less expensive.

Let us remove the stumbling blocks and tear down the walls.

