

"Theological Amputation"
Mark 9:38-50
September 26, 2021
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Can you imagine the job description to be one of Jesus's disciples?

Wanted: Person of dubious background to follow itinerant preacher. No experience necessary. No salary. No health insurance. Meals provided- must like bread and fish. Sandals optional. No hope for advancement. Public humiliation likely. Saltiness required. Theological amputation may occur. Benefits: eternal.

Is it any surprise there were only twelve of them at the beginning? How many of us would apply for that job? And yet- here we are- in worship on a Sunday morning, claiming to be followers of Jesus Christ. It makes me wonder if we really have any idea what we are doing here.

You may have noticed that the disciples don't have the greatest reputation in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

After their initial enthusiastic response to Jesus's call to follow, they are portrayed as confused, ignorant, mean-spirited, selfish, and lacking in faith. Where they really start to shine, though, is in the book of Acts. After Jesus has left them and the Holy Spirit comes upon them in wind and fire they take the lead in Christ's ministry, and they change the world.

I am glad that we know about that because here, in the beginning, in the Gospel of Mark, they aren't looking too impressive. And that gives me hope- for us as disciples of Christ.

It isn't easy being a disciple of Jesus no matter which century you are living in. When Jesus chose his inner circle, he didn't go to the rabbinical college, or to the government offices. He didn't ask around about the smartest guy in town or look in the offering plate to see who gave the most money to the temple.

When Jesus was choosing his disciples, he walked along the lakeshore and called the guys who were fishing. He walked by the tax collector in the town square. It

appears that he mostly called out to complete strangers. The Bible gives us no reason why he called any of them. And so, apparently, there was no reason **not** to call them. From the very beginning of the Gospel story. Jesus was making a point about who was disciple-material. Everyone. Everyone was disciple material. And that is very good news for us.

A number of years ago I attended the orientation retreat for Ministry Summer Service interns and mentors. The mentors, mostly pastors, took turns sharing the stories of their calling to ministry. Kelly was a young pastor at that time. I had been her pastor when she was in high school and college. When it was her turn, she said, "When I met Christy I realized if she could be a pastor anyone could." The group erupted with laughter. It took her a moment to realize that what she had just said could be interpreted as very unflattering to me.

She quickly clarified, "No, what I mean is that she was so down-to-earth, approachable, and human as a pastor that I thought maybe I could do that too." I am glad I wasn't a stumbling block for her!

This section of Mark's Gospel, chapters eight, nine, and ten, is jam-packed with important information. They were on their way to Jerusalem- to what Jesus knew would be the place of his suffering and death. It was a lot for the disciples to take in. Here is a synopsis:

- In a moment of clarity, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah.
- Three times Jesus tells the disciples that he will be rejected and killed and then will rise again after three days.
- Then he said if any want to follow him they must deny themselves and take up their own cross.
- Peter, James, and John go up the mountain with Jesus and watch in utter amazement as he is transfigured before their eyes.

As Jesus and the three disciples come down from the mountain, they see the rest of the disciples in the middle of a great crowd and a great argument. Turns out that a man had brought his son to the disciples for an exorcism, and they couldn't do it. Instead of quietly taking the offending disciples aside and going over

Exorcism 101, Jesus chewed them out in front of everyone. *"What the heck is wrong with you people? Must I do everything? Bring the boy to me!* In the presence of Jesus, the evil spirit immediately departed, and the father professed his faith in Jesus. Later, when they were alone with Jesus the disciples asked, "What did we do wrong?" He said simply, *" You forgot to pray first."* Ouch!

Once again, Jesus tells them that he will die and rise again. The next thing the disciples discuss is who is the greatest among them. Jesus responded to that ridiculous argument by holding a little child on his lap and saying, *"Whoever welcomes one of the littles one, welcomes me. And not only welcomes me, but they welcome God too."*

So, the scene is set for our text for today. The disciples see someone they don't know exorcising demons, so they run to Jesus and tattle. *"Jesus, we just saw someone casting out demons in your name, but he isn't one of us!"*

Can you imagine the disciples saying to each other, *"Ohhh, he is going to be in so much trouble!"* But he isn't. They are.

Jesus corrects them yet again. *"If he is doing it in my name then he can't be against us."* I wonder if their own failure to cast out the demon in that boy is causing them to be so harsh to one who is successful. Envy can do that.

Although the disciples are quick to point at someone else, Jesus forces them to turn their attention and their pointing fingers back on themselves. And he uses quite vivid language.

Last Sunday we heard about Jesus holding a child and the writer of Mark's Gospel doesn't say that Jesus sent that child out to play. So, picture Jesus, still holding that child and he says to the twelve, *"If any one of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me..."*

"If you get in the way of someone else's faith, you might as well tie a rock around your neck and jump into the lake; you might as well cut off your hand or your foot or put out your eye. If your words or actions cause someone else to turn away from God- look out!"

Assuming that Jesus wasn't calling for a gang of limping, blind, handless disciples to stumble after him, perhaps he was exaggerating- for theological reason. Theologian Jana Childers reminds us that in the Gospel of Mark the disciples trip over their own feet and tongues quite often.

Their spiritual clumsiness is a potential hazard not just to themselves but to the cause of Jesus. In this case they are stumbling over their own egos, their desires for greatness. Jana Childers suggests that the community of God is more like a family dinner table than a pie eating contest; more like "red rover come over" than dodge ball; more like a conga line than a scrimmage line. Jesus calls his disciples to stop competing against one another and start serving each other and those around them. Everything Jesus taught them was in

stark contrast to what the world around them taught. And it still is. Our culture is all about rugged individualism, being # 1 at all costs, and protecting my own rights no matter what it costs someone else.

Some things haven't changed much in 2000 years. We still fear that there isn't enough for everyone, so we must claw our way to the top of the pile. Too many preachers and religious leaders buy into this mentality and encourage people to believe that the only purpose in following Jesus is for your own personal fulfillment and satisfaction.

Nowhere is this more blatant and disturbing than in the current debate over wearing masks and getting vaccinated to protect against COVID. Followers of Jesus are called to be concerned about the common good, even to sacrifice for the good of others. They are not called to threaten someone who requests that they wear a mask in public spaces to protect others. You know religion has gone off the rails when it is used to justify selfish individualism. Jesus was all about community. He was all about looking out for the needs and interests of others.

In her commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm writes, *"First and foremost, Mark's Gospel proclaims the power of God as the good news of Jesus Christ alive among us, intervening in human lives and events. The good news is that God has entered and transformed human reality through Jesus Christ. This transformation affects personal as well as social aspects of life. Jesus confronts poverty, illness, social boundaries, demons, individual sin, and institutional evil."* (1)

Everything Jesus said and did was to bring the presence of God near to human beings. Everything he said and did was a call to us to participate in this ministry of presence and transformation.

Dawn writes, "Throughout his kingdom proclamation, Jesus engages us in the power of God at work in the world: power that refuses to control or to crush others but is willing to risk rejection and suffering for the sake of drawing all people into God's just and loving reign. (2)

Discipleship is not about power and privilege; it is not about possessiveness and exclusion. Discipleship is about acting in the name of Jesus, loving and welcoming others. Jesus has high expectations for those who wish to follow him. We don't always meet those expectations- but he loves us and forgives us and includes us anyway.

Jesus was serious about those more mature in the faith not putting up obstacles for those who are just learning the ropes. He was serious about the necessity of the faith community.

We are bound together not just by common interest or mutual enjoyment, but by our convictions about the fundamental issues of human existence; by what we believe most deeply; by what gives value and meaning to our lives; under what obligations we live; by how we define and achieve a God-centered life; by who we are.

As the body of Christ in this place we hold each other accountable to the promises we have made to Christ and to this faith community. We support and teach one another. We learn from and we pray for each other.

How about this want ad:

Wanted: Deeply flawed and frail human beings willing to walk with Jesus Christ on the journey through life. Forgiveness issued daily. No experience required.

Must be willing to love yourself and others as God loves you. Humility is preferred.

Saltiness is required. Must be unafraid to get into trouble for the good news. Must be willing to travel together. Benefits are out of this world!

I'm in.

How about you?

Amen.

END NOTES:

- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MARK: PROCLAIMING THE POWER OF God*, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Westminster John Knox Press. 2008. P. xii.
- Ottoni Wilhelm, p. xiii