

September 27

Actions Count

Mark 9:38-50

Talk about childish. The disciples come up to Jesus all smiles wishing to be congratulated. They let him know that they had seen someone casting out demons in Jesus' name and they had told him to stop. After all, he wasn't part of their group. He hadn't been trained by Jesus. He might give their group a bad reputation! They were sure Jesus would be proud of them. Instead of being praised for their actions Jesus condemns them. They acted out of the best of intentions, or so they thought. But what they were really saying to the world is that we belong to a select group. There are rules for membership. If you don't follow them, doing what we say, then you are wrong and you need to stop. Pretty childish isn't it. We see it in children who tell someone, "You are no longer my best friend. You can't play with me and my friends or sit with us at lunch."

Finger pointing, saying if you don't do it my way, believe what I believe then you are wrong and I want nothing to do with you, happened then and still does. Much of what we are seeing masquerading as presidential politics during this run up to the primary season is this kind of finger pointing. Now we understand that this is part of the game of politics, wanting your base to see you as the only one to support and others as not one of us. But we see this also in other areas of life, even within the church.

Conservative theologians will say something like this about progressive Christians: "They don't follow the word of Jesus," at least as they define it on some current issue, "so they aren't really Christians." On the reverse we have the progressives saying about their opposites: "They are just mean spirited and not following Jesus command to love so they aren't really Christian." To try and find a middle ground is seen as betrayal by both sides. And so we stand and point at the other side telling them to stop because they are not one of us.

When the disciples do something similar they are condemned for it by Jesus and yet it continues. We are still very childish in our behavior. There are many places where we need to grow and change in our actions.

I am guessing the disciples were really surprised to have Jesus tell them that such prideful actions and thoughts are more of a problem to him than the person acting in Jesus name without permission. Jesus says that those who are not against us are with us. It is a sobering thought to think that Jesus might tell us, like he did his disciples, that some of our actions and thoughts make us more of a problem than those we claim are not one of us.

Yet then, like now, we split over interpretations of theology and this comes across to those outside the church as something less than positive. Think about how much we destroy the power of Jesus today by all the finger pointing that we do!

To make his point Jesus says one of the harshest things he says in the Gospels. "If anyone cause these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be thrown into the lake." Ouch. Who are the little ones? They are the powerless, the uninformed. Where do we let our "precious assumptions" become stumbling blocks for others?

Beyond this more general interpretation of the term "little ones," I think Jesus would like for us to think about children as a test as to whether our actions are acceptable. If what you are doing causes harm to them, don't do it. Too often in our holding of ideas with the resultant cost being anger towards others, we think they are adults they can take it. To ask how would a child see our actions is a check. We might even see that our actions are presenting a stumbling block for them. After all, it is hard to get a child to be forgiving if what they hear from us is intolerance. We are to always ask, "What are the implications for what I am doing?"

Jesus says doing good for the wrong reasons is better than doing harmful things from good motives! It is still a lesson we need to hear because we are often more concerned about being right instead of doing good.

Jesus realized that there are many types of stumbling blocks. Many of them have become so much a part of us they are like a part of our body. He wants us to consider that some actions are so dangerous they should be severed. The violence of Jesus' hyperbole here is inescapable. He uses an over-the-top, **BOLDED AND ALL CAPS** format to get the disciples', and our, attention. We are likely to think there's nothing worse than losing a hand, a foot, or an eye. But Jesus says there is. The consequences of causing another to stumble are far worse.

What are the stumbling blocks we place, often unknowingly, often in faithful enthusiasm, in front of the most vulnerable among us? Here are just a few.

You have to come to church for us to be in ministry to you. Think about the last time you intentionally practiced your Christianity on the street? Yet, how are people going to know about our faith except from those that pound on our doors proclaiming an often narrow and sometimes harsh version of the Jesus message?

If we can't agree on some key, at least to us, issue we can't work together for God. Whether this is churches refusing to work with other churches for community projects because of differences in theology, or people who refuse to talk to others because they have different views, we present a lot of division to the world, when Jesus says that all who claim the name and power of Jesus are one.

We see some acting as if forgiveness is earned instead of freely given. We see people of faith carrying with them anger and bitterness towards another for years. We hear them saying unless the other person says they are sorry I won't forgive them. What does that say to others when we also proclaim a God who loves, forgives and through his son's death all could be forgiven?

Jesus would tell us in each situation, whatever is keeping us from truly living the faith we should cut out of our lives, no matter how precious it is to us. Yet, too often, like the disciples, we are more concerned with being right than doing good. We are so childish in our ways.

Think about how life might be different if we asked ourselves how our actions might impact a little child. If you have had the opportunity to be around children in a school setting you clearly see the impact of adult actions on children. The environment of the home is clearly communicated by the child's actions in the classroom. Many are the teachers of the youngest students who wish they could change the parent's actions and reactions to life, knowing it would make a huge difference in the child.

So we are called to strive to do good, not be right. To think always that there is a three- to five-year-old at our elbow hearing all that we are saying and seeing all we are doing. From that they are creating a model of what a faithful person believes and how they act. Would you be proud of that model they are creating by observing you? Have your actions possibly caused them to stumble? These are questions of faith for all of us.

Compromise is not a bad thing. Embracing others who see things differently is all right, not a giving up of our principals. Doing good, which means loving and forgiving and caring, is more important than being right. This is how we keep from putting stumbling blocks in front of others. May it be so.