

Sermon: Jesus and the Lame-O's

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

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You can almost sense Jesus' exasperation with the disciples as he moves closer to Jerusalem and his death and his teachings reflect that. It seems he's trying to shock the disciples into a new way of thinking and I'm not sure it ever really works; it's shocking alright, it's just that they never quite understand the difference between what Jesus is championing and what the world is. Eventually he'll die, return from the grave, and put his own Spirit in them and finally they'll be like "Ohhhh, I think I get it! It's not about who is in and who is out, who belongs and who doesn't, who is deserving and who is not, whose the greatest, it's about love." But man, Jesus has to work so hard to break through their patterns of thinking and behaving that keep them in rivalry with one another.

The disciple, John, says "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because *he wasn't following us.*" Apparently John was feeling kind of proud of that, despite the fact that Jesus had just smacked them down for arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. (SLIDE) They were like "we're a pretty big deal" and Jesus was like, (SLIDE) "No. To be greatest you must be servant of all." Apparently John doesn't get the point. He along and the other disciples are still jockeying for position in Jesus' posse even though Jesus has told them twice now unequivocally – "you know I'm going to Jerusalem to die right? That's my road and if your riding with me, that's where you're going to. It's not prestige and power, privilege and fame, success and glory there rather it's sacrifice and death. And John is worried about some guy pretending like he belongs to Jesus' inner circle and when this is the promise of the inner circle.

Jesus says to John (SLIDE) “Do not stop him, for no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.”

See how Jesus flips the tables there, trying to jolt John and the other disciples out of their sleepwalking where they are in control, they are the chosen ones, they are the deciders and the power holders – “actually, John, if anyone gives YOU what YOU need, they are great and will receive their reward. It’s not about you John and your reward and your power and your virtue and whose with us or against us! Ok? This is something altogether different that we are going for. Do you get it? I’m not sure you do. Maybe I need to get graphic with you!

And now we are set up to hear the following passage understanding how Jesus is trying to shock his disciples into a new way of thinking with these words: (SLIDE)

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

In case you have seen a millstone in a while...(SLIDE). It’s how you treat the least that is actually most important. In their upward climb and effort to ascend in importance and value and worth, Jesus takes one of little worth making him the measuring stick and says “you want to rise, well let me tell you how you can fall – cause harm to a little one, the unnoticed and powerless and voiceless and in the judgment of the kingdom you might as well be drowned at sea.”

And as if that is not graphic enough, Jesus lays this doozy on them...

⁴³ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to

stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where the worms that eat them do not die and the fire is never quenched.

So here's the thing. This is not Jesus giving us a literal account of a place called Hell where those of us who have not behaved or who have not believed the right things go to be eternally tortured. It's Jesus using hyperbole to make a point. (SLIDE) I'm not suggesting he's joking around, cause I think he's deadly serious... (SLIDE) in his effort to get his disciples to see things the way he needs them to see things, which is from Heaven's perspective rather than this world's perspective, for this world's perspective too often looks like Hell's. (SLIDE) That's not hell, that's on our border. (SLIDE) That's not hell, that's the earth, that's California.

So what is the perspective of heaven? (SLIDE) That we should mutilate ourselves in an effort to be sinless and perfect? I don't think so. Rather Jesus is making room for the mutilated and blemished and imperfect ones to come before God. But to get that point from this passage you have to understand what Jesus could very well be referencing here when he's suggesting to maim and blind oneself. You've gotta go back to Leviticus chapter 21 where there's a description of the priestly requirements for coming before God and serving God in the temple...

¹⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ¹⁷ "Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near as a priest of God. ¹⁸ No man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; ¹⁹ no man with a crippled foot or hand... is to present the food offerings to the LORD... (SLIDE) he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.'"

In ancient Judaism of the second temple period, blindness and lameness, among other defects, made someone ritually impure and excluded them from priestly service. Who is the greatest? Definitely not the lame and the blind. Any blemish in the priest or the animal that the priest sacrificed was strictly forbidden. The fear was that such impurities would defile the house of the Lord. And at the time of Jesus anyone and everyone around Jesus would know that, that the blind and lame were not allowed in the temple. This very temple regulation comes into play on Palm Sunday and Jesus' cleansing of the temple if you remember. Jump over to Matthew 21 and read (SLIDE) - "The blind and the lame came to Jesus at the temple and he healed them... and the children shouted in the temple courts "hosanna to the son of David!" and the chief priests were indignant." Matthew 21:14-15

Interesting, right? Children and the blind and the lame all there at the temple and the religious authorities, freaking out! (SLIDE) And Jesus goes right for the jugular and uses what as examples of those who actually belong – children and the lame and the blind.

Jesus was a Jew of the prophetic tradition and within that stream of thought contrary to the priestly tradition, there was a promise from the prophet Jeremiah of the restoration of the Hebrew people to Jerusalem after their time of exile and it went like this: (SLIDE)

³ The LORD appeared to us saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. ⁴ I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt.... I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. (SLIDE) Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return with weeping and prayer as I bring them back.

There they are again – the lame, the blind and the babies. Those you would least expect to be welcomed maybe, right there at the front, being brought back home. (SLIDE) Those least able to contribute are received as the honored guests. Those with no power and less voice, surrounded by angels' song. Those most likely to be excluded are the first included and in fact they, in their terrible dependence and need, are to be our example into the kingdom. It's all just a little topsy-turvy, really, and makes you wonder why followers of Jesus, don't come across as more topsy-turvy themselves, with a teacher like Jesus leading the way.

Jesus drops the “put a millstone around your neck and cut off your hand a foot if you want to enter life” statements on his disciples and they stand there like lame-o's, stunned, never quite getting what he's driving at... until eventually Jesus' feet and hands are the ones pierced and maimed... then it begins to dawn on them which way is up in the kingdom of God. And to a world like theirs and a world like ours, the lone figure of Jesus holding out for a world like God's sourced in love for the purposes of love, that lone figure is necessarily forever going to seem a bit unhinged as he chooses his cross over rivalry with others. I always like how the writer Frederick Buechner articulates things and so I'll end with his words:

IF THE WORLD IS sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, find your bliss and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The world says, Law and Order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get and Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.