

26 September 2021: Mark 9:38-50 (Proper 21)

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have said: “I *have* to lose weight! Tomorrow I will start eating healthy, and exercise!” Such grand resolutions usually come after a doctor’s appointment. The reality is: I am too heavy and since it is unlikely, I will grow taller the solution is obvious.

I assure you this is not a sermon about dieting. I am an example of how human beings have a remarkable capacity to recognize reality, and then promptly act in ways contrary to that reality. When it comes to eating, my sincere intentions starve within 24 hours. Why? Regardless of what we resolve to do, we can have deeper hidden needs/desires driving us. Until the deeper needs are admitted and addressed, we are unlikely to change. The reality of my desire for instant comfort that food provides eclipses the fact that food is a problem for me.

Jesus knows we tend to prefer momentary comfort to long-term blessing. In the reading just before today’s Gospel the disciples argue about which of them is greatest; in response Jesus explodes all self-serving ideas of greatness. Today, John whines about an unknown person healing in Jesus’ Name and wants to stop him. Jesus tells them to leave him alone. We might think Jesus’ words are about exclusivity and inclusivity. If this is the point, his words are bizarrely ill-chosen. Jesus’ words about cups of water, stumbling blocks, millstones around necks and getting rid of eyes, hands, and feet as a requisite for entering God’s Kingdom point us in a different direction.

In Mark’s Gospel there are two radically different views of reality. In this instance, John, the Disciples’ spokesman, sees Jesus’ work in the world as a private and privileged operation. Coupled with the preceding passage—about greatness—the disciples appear incapable of understanding Jesus’ ministry in any way other than “rights and privileges.” That is, their rights and privileges; their ‘rank,’ and ‘reward,’ their notion of what is and isn’t allowed. In Jesus’ view, his ministry is not about rights and privileges but service and sacrifice. Only from this perspective do his sayings about cups of water, stumbling blocks, hands, feet, and eyes make sense. The Kingdom of God is the place and time when divine mercy is poured out on mortals. And it will cost—for new life to spring forth something else must die. What must die, what we must want to die, is concern for our own ‘rights and privileges.’ We are to simply serve God and others; and thereby, sacrifice our pride, sins, double-mindedness, and double-heartedness for God’s glory.

Literally all Bible commentators hold that Jesus’ words about self-mutilation are symbolic, not literal. Anything and everything that inhibits our service and sacrifice for God’s Kingdom must be jettisoned, because serving others in Christ’s Name and sacrificing even what is dear to us for God’s sake, *are* the definitive signs of the Kingdom of which we are part. To imagine we can be followers of Jesus without placing service to one another and the world’s hurting and hungry, to imagine that we need not sacrifice our egos, not generously give of our time, talents, and treasure, abandon our ‘rights and privileges’ to Jesus and for Jesus, is rather like imagining we can swim without getting into the water. To swim one must get wet; to follow Jesus, we serve and sacrifice.

Jesus’ view of reality always leads to joy. Service and sacrifice bring joy because through compassion and works of mercy we do God’s will for the world; through compassion and works of mercy we *become* God’s will for the world. To serve and sacrifice is the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, the way to eternal life; these are the actions that grow joy. The other view of reality only produces temporary ‘comfort’ and not much of that. If we fixate on the secondary and impermanent, if instead of kindness, generosity, and gentleness we squabble, grumble, and choose sides—how can such things produce joy? We are trying to swim on land, wondering why we are not going anywhere.

We are called to go somewhere: into the Kingdom. We journey towards this Promised Land as we serve others, giving ‘ourselves, our souls, and bodies’ for Jesus’ sake and that of others. As we journey towards the Kingdom, we bring the Kingdom to our relationships, our environments, our parish, our families. Through God’s grace and power at work in us, we become what we seek. As those around us see God at work in us and through us they, too, will want to journey to Christ, with Christ, in Christ.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.