

Sermon Notes for 9/27/15 (Pentecost 18)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Mark 9:38-50

Theme: BE CAREFUL WHICH PERSONS YOU HUSH!

Hymn: LBW 384 (Your Kingdom Come, O Father)

The Point: God's involvement with and movement among humanity trumps human judgment against others whose loyalty we may question and whose faith we may damage.

Introduction: The other day I heard a radio discussion about the question of whether God has anything to do with a certain football team winning its games. (Vikings and Packers fans, be easy on me here.) I thought one of the commentators made a good point. He said that when a player credits his success to God by giving thanks to God for the strength to play and the gifts to succeed, that is one thing. When someone suggests, however, that God is out to see that one team defeats another, then we have stepped into the territory of the unknowable. I reviewed that conversation as I was going over today's Gospel lesson.

One issue that we face in daily discipleship is the question of who speaks for and acts for God. How can we tell? How do we know? The apostles had to deal with this question also. They wanted to issue a "cease and desist" order on a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name because the man was not part of the group of disciples who were following Jesus. But Jesus warned them not to try to stop the man. His reason is stated thus: "for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

The disciples had not considered these implications, but Jesus had. If a man is doing miracles specifically in the name of Jesus, he will not soon after that be found speaking evil of Jesus. The disciples wanted to argue this way: "If anyone is not with us, he is against us." But Jesus turned that argument around, reasoning that "whoever is not against us is for us." This puts things in a whole different light, doesn't it? Christian Community Development encourages God's people to see all positive assets of a community as kingdom assets, as resources by which God intends to further His community of faith.

Jesus speaks a word of warning to the disciples who were looking to hush this outsider, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Hopeless, watery death would be preferred to the results of putting a stumbling block before one of the smallest of Jesus' disciples.

The term which is translated "stumbling" or "stumbling block" is the Greek word from which we get our word "scandal" (*skandalizw*). But the Greek term refers to more than just something that damages a person's reputation, more than a slight tripping of my feet. *Skandalizw* is more comprehensive and more specific than just some little stumble that we might take. It refers to the loss of faith – or to the interference with one's relationship with God.

That is what is at stake here – not just a little stubbing of the toe, but a spiritual disaster, a crisis of faith. TDNT: "The *skandalon* is an obstacle in coming to faith and a cause of going astray in it." In other words, the one Jesus talks about here, the one who causes another to stumble, is the one whose influence and effort specifically keeps a person from trusting the Savior or who undermines the faith of one of Christ's followers. And those who act in such ways will suffer some horrendous consequences.

As an example of this, we might think of some of the pastors, priests, or church leaders who have abused young children. Certainly there are many thousands of people today who turn their backs on the church and on Jesus Christ because of mistreatment that they have experienced through those who presume to be leaders of God's people. This would be one of the reasons that James insists that not many of us should be

teachers, because we will be judged with greater strictness. This call to avoid causing others to stumble in their faith because of our sins is a serious burden that church leaders must bear.

We are called to a mutuality within the church, to care for and to love one another. That was what amazed people about the early Christians: “See how they love one another!” This mutuality is pictured for us by James in today’s Epistle: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” The life of prayer and praise is to mark God’s people at all times. Let us take advantage of all the opportunities we have to pray for one another, especially reassuring one another about God’s desire and power to forgive.

What Jesus’ words remind us is that nothing is more important in a person’s life than their relationship with their Lord. I need to acknowledge and recognize that, for myself as well as for each and every other person. As much as I might enjoy being liked, I need to realize that it is far more critical for each and every one of you that you have a right relationship with your Lord and Master than that you like your pastor. I hope I don’t go around deliberately leading people to dislike me, but my first responsibility is to proclaim God’s truth to you, no matter how that may make you feel about me. Your first and primary issue in life is to know God’s love and to embrace Him in the person of Jesus Christ, whatever it takes for that to happen. And anyone who deliberately interferes with that process is subject to judgment.

When others know our commitment to and relationship with God, it colors their interaction with us, just as it would color a professor’s treatment of certain topics if he knows that the president’s son or daughter is a student in his classroom. Of course, that knowledge might lead me to refrain from building relationships with others, which would not be a God-pleasing result. But it may also lead me to walk in ways that honor our Lord. And that glorifies our heavenly Father. Jesus talks about His disciples “bearing the name.” He has placed His name on us in our Baptism, so that we are living poster-boards for Jesus.

When Scottish theologian John Baillie taught at Edinburgh University, he made it a practice to open his course on the doctrine of God with these words: “We must remember, in discussing God, that we cannot talk about Him without His hearing every word we say. We may be able to talk about others behind their backs, but God is everywhere, yes, even in this classroom. Therefore, in all our discussions we must be aware of His infinite presence, and talk about Him, as it were, before His face.” How would this transform our decision-making, if we remember that everything we say and do, we do in the presence of our Father?

And even when we fail in this desire, we need to remember that our Lord’s love is not contingent on our response or our faithfulness. He loves, and He shows mercy, and He continues working out His will despite my failures to get on board with Him. Moses was at the point of burnout when he approached the Lord with his complaint: “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” He was ready to die, the burden of caring for the Israelites was so heavy. But God worked a solution. He told Moses to gather 70 of Israel’s elders, and when that had been done the Lord took some of the spirit that rested on Moses and put it on the 70 elders so they prophesied and then also were able to share some of the load that Moses had carried. Yahweh saw to the ongoing ministry even when Moses was burned out.

There were two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, who had been registered with the others but who did not go to the tabernacle with the rest. However, the spirit came upon them also, and they prophesied in the camp. Joshua wanted Moses to hush them, since they had not gone through the proper channels to be

serving in this way. But Moses replied with a generous and expectant heart: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” In saying this, Moses leaned forward into Pentecost, when the Spirit of the Lord was poured out on all the followers of the Christ. Paul says to the whole church, “Be eager to prophesy.” Speaking forth the Good News of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection can be the first word on our tongues and the resounding of our final breath.

David Nasmith is often regarded as founder of the first Protestant city missions. Here is an excerpt from his first extant letter, in which he indicated his desire to be of use for God’s kingdom. It was written on September 21, 1816, when he was seventeen years old. “May He who has the hearts of all in his own hand, raise up many who shall not count their lives dear unto them that they may win souls unto the Saviour! Oh that the Lord, in his own good time and way, may prepare me to be useful either in that, or some other way, which he may see to be most for his own glory and the good of my soul!” (Campbell, John. *Memoirs of David Nasmith*, London: John Snow, 1844) I don’t know that my memoirs at age 17 would have been so mission-centered and Christ-centered. Thank God for those whose memoirs are!

Rev. Ken Klaus in his daily devotions published by Lutheran Hour Ministries recently told about a teacher who gave her fifth-grade students some well-known sayings (at least, well-known to most adults), to see how they might complete them. How did they finish them? “It is better to be safe than . . . punch an eighth grader.” “A miss is as good as a . . . mister.” “You can’t teach an old dog new . . . math.” And the one that most closely relates to our concerns today, “Children should be seen and not . . . spanked or grounded.” Our typical way of completing that saying, “Children should be seen and not heard” may not be the most helpful framework to use. Sometimes the youngest and least experienced and most unlikely people may have the most to teach us. You remember the account of Jesus putting a little child in the midst of the disciples as a model: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Child-like faith means a lot to our heavenly Father. God gets a lot done through some unexpected people and events. Don’t hush the kids! They may point us to Jesus!

Many pagan leaders have discovered that trying to hush the witness of those who bear the name is not all that helpful to their pagan cause. September 22 (last Tuesday) has been set aside in the church calendar, not as summer’s last day, but to honor the Theban Legion. These Roman soldiers, most of whom came from Thebes in ancient Egypt, came as a unit to confess Christ as Lord. They were ordered by Emperor Maximian to march from the east to Gaul, where the emperor was. About the same time, Maximian ordered a general sacrifice. The whole army was expected to take an oath of absolute allegiance to the emperor and to help him by wiping out Christianity in Gaul. Not one of the Theban Legion would sacrifice or take the prescribed oaths. Maximian ordered decimation of the Legion – one of every ten put to death. But none bowed the knee to the emperor. So he ordered a second decimation, another tenth put to death. Still the rest held fast to their confession of Christ. The emperor was so enraged at their perseverance that he ordered his other troops to execute the whole legion, some 6000 soldiers. It was done on September 22, 286, and as often happens, from the blood of the martyrs the church was fed and grew. Less than 30 years later, Emperor Constantine published the Edict of Milan in which Christianity was granted full tolerance in the empire, and some 70 years after that, Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. Who won the day – Emperor Maximian, who tried his best to hush the voices that confessed Christ, or those martyred soldiers, who refused to deny their Savior?

Conclusion: God is out and about in this world, moving through people and circumstances that we can often only guess at. We do know that He promises to show up where His Word is proclaimed and where the sacraments are carried out by Christ’s command. That is why it is so critical for His people to be present in worship regularly. There He meets with us as He has promised. But He is not above acting through some most unlikely sources. He acted through Cyrus the Persian king to release the Israelites to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. When Cyrus’ decree had been nearly forgotten, Darius brought out the

records and allowed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. The Lord spoke a prophetic word through Caiaphas the high priest about Christ being the one who would die for the entire nation, indeed for the whole world. He was speaking through Eldad and Medad, even though they had not been in the right place with the other elders. He worked through the man who was exorcising demons in Jesus' name, though the apostles did not recognize him. Let us be careful which persons we hush, lest we be found standing in opposition to the word and work of our Lord. And let us also be generous and compassionate toward those who are weaker in the faith, so that our words and actions do not lead them farther away from Jesus but, rather, closer to Him in faith. For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and His honor and praise, AMEN!