

Whose Side?
Mark 9:38-50

Some biblical texts are just harder to preach than others. Back in August we heard God speak through St. Paul to tell husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church and wives to submit to their husbands. While it's not an easy text to preach because we may not like what it has to say, at least we understand what it is saying.

Is that true of today's reading from Mark?

Not all of it is difficult. *Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.*

Darla would much rather teach at the high school than the middle school and especially at Lambert. One of the reasons is tattling: "Teacher, teacher, did you see what Don did?" She has her own method of nipping this practice in the bud, but would rather not have to deal with it at all.

There may be a bit of that in John's words to Jesus, his teacher, but there is more. There is jealousy. You may remember that two Sunday's ago we heard of the disciples' failed attempt to drive out a particular mute and deaf spirit. Jesus had to come to the rescue, and later shared: *This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.* This outsider's success rubs them the wrong way, and he is just that, an outsider. He is not a follower of Jesus like they are. They are jealous for Jesus and for themselves that someone else is joining their game uninvited.

Jesus puts an end to this small minded thinking by saying: *Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my*

name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us.

Jesus continues with talking of drowning oneself, cutting off hands and feet, and tearing out eyeballs. *[I]f your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. ... [I]f your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. ... And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out.*

Is Jesus promoting self-mutilation and suicide by drowning? Or is He following the same line of thought from a different direction? Does your hand, foot, or eye actually cause you to sin? Are they the source of the problem? Or is it a matter of the heart? Is your heart for Jesus or against Him? Which side are you on?

Bob figured there was something wrong with his baseball glove. This was the fourth time in a row that a fly ball had landed in right in his glove, only to pop out again and land on the grass. Things started to look up, though, at the top of the next inning. Bob batted second and got on base. It was only a single, but it gave Bob a sense of victory. He got a little lost in that sense of victory.

As he stood on first base he began to daydream of greater plays to come. Lost in his thoughts, he did not run to second when his teammate hit the next pitch. Two players on the same base is an out.

Bob slowly made his way back to the dugout. His teammates greeted him with silence. Finally, Nicholas spoke up. He turned slowly to Bob, and with gentleness said, "There is one thing I don't understand. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Whose side are you on? To be honest, it may be hard to tell sometimes. How do you use God's name? In prayer? In praise? In thanksgiving? Do you offer a "cup of cold water" in God's name?

Or do you use God's name in anger or frustration? Do you use His name to make a point or draw someone's attention back to your pointless rambling?

Whose side are you on? Sometimes it's hard to tell. And in this case it's not just about you. What if *one of these little ones* hears you and you cause that person to stumble? Jesus said something about a millstone. The misuse of God's name has serious consequences!

Used in the right way, God's name accomplishes great things! Demons are cast out! Our hearts are made new! Jesus, who came in His Father's name knew whose side He was on. It says about Him in Philippians: *being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross* (2:8). Here we have the name for its true purpose: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation – your forgiveness, your life, your salvation.

In today's text the Greek word for "cause to sin" is skandalon, scandal. However, Jesus introduces into your life a new scandal. This scandal is the scandal of the cross. Christ crucified, the stumbling block to the Jews, is at the same time taking away from you the penalty for your scandals. For the moments in your life that you do not use this name for all that it is, for the times that you cause one to stumble by not showing whose side you really are on, Christ

crucified and the scandal of the cross is taking away from you the punishment you have deserved.

So what does it look like to be on his side? What does it look like to use his name in the way that it should be used? You know! You bear His name as one who belongs to him. You have had that name placed on you when sin, death, and the devil were cast out of you by the same name at your baptism. This name is the name that you can wake up to every morning of your life in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The name above all names that rests on you, and marks you as one saved from that place *where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched*.

Support and encourage others who are on the same side and who bear the name of Jesus, using it in prayer, praise, thanksgiving, consolation, and all that we have been given to do under this name. Give that cup of cold water.

Wrapping things up, Jesus says: *have salt in yourselves*. You are worth so much to God that He doesn't want anything or anyone, including your own sinful heart, to cause you to stumble away from Him.

And so He may shake your life up a bit now and then to lead you to repentance and forgiveness. This is always with the goal that He may sprinkle your life with His gifts, and that you may share with those around you the flavor of the Gospel. Think of it, you are the ones who salt the earth with the good news of Jesus Christ. Whose side are you on? You know! Now show your neighbor! Amen.