

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 ~ Mark 9:38-50

Where the Spirit Resides

19th Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 29, 2024

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Introduction to Second Lesson:

"Stop them! They're doing it wrong!" Don't you love the way Joshua, Moses' right-hand man, (our scripture falls over itself to make clear, "Joshua, son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men"), okay we get it: Big Man on Campus *Joshua*, tells Moses to stop them! Stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp. But Moses basically says to Deputy Joshua, "Heck no! Why would I do that? God needs everyone on God's team, no matter where or when or who." If you think about, Eldad and Medad are basically the first remote worshippers! They were back at camp, not in church (we aren't told why, not important). And indeed, the Spirit rested upon them, at the very same time God was distributing the spirit among the seventy "in person" elders. So yes, you who are livestreaming right now, or whenever or however you worship with a recording of our service: this is a shout out to you. For you, too, can receive the Spirit and be called to prophesy in Jesus' name. Friends, this is not some new, loosey goosey gospel derivative idea. This truth comes to us straight from Moses and the voices in the wilderness of Sinai back about 1200 years *before* Jesus was born. Yes, Moses got this one so right. Remote or in-person worshippers are equal in the eyes of the Lord.

Fast forward about 1200 years: "We tried to stop him," disciple John reported to Jesus, about a stranger they had not vetted who successfully performed exorcisms in Jesus' name. He was doing it wrong. Sound familiar? Like Moses, Jesus quickly and decisively reframed and redirected John and all 12 of his disciples. Or I could say, he shocked, scared, and even perhaps disgusted them with a graphic lesson that I am about to read to you. If this scripture lesson was a Netflix or docudrama it would come with a content warning: this passage contains self-harm, blood, and death. Jesus really goes off on a scary, breathless rant. If you are brave enough to let his tirade into your imagination, you may even smell the soldering smoke.

One more thing, before I read the text, let's recall where we were at the end of our Mark reading last Sunday when we baptized sweet Caroline. Jesus was sitting down in the traditional teaching position, showing and telling his 12 disciples what greatness looks like by taking a child into his arms, and saying: "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*" (Mark 9:37). So, we pick up right at that moment today, smack in the middle of his teaching about greatness in God's eyes as serving the "the least of these." That is the moment in the narrative world of Mark, when John rudely interrupts Rabbi Teacher Jesus. Apparently, John is busting to brag to Jesus about something he thought they had done right. Maybe still trying to rack on some greatness points? Perhaps. In any case, I invite you to visualize as you hear this text: there is *absolutely no indication* that Jesus set that child aside.¹ Yes: Jesus launches into this teaching with the unnamed toddler still in his arms. Here it goes.

Sermon:

Has anyone ever seen a millstone? They were made out of sandstone or granite, used for grinding grain and weighed over 100 lbs. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain this scary saying of Jesus, "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea, than if you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones." Yes, like the one he is still holding in his arms. Yikes, Jesus. That's harsh. But he didn't just leave it at the millstone. He goes off on a breathless rant, piling on three different kinds of self-mutilation (hand, foot, eye), oh my. Or go to "h – e – double hockey sticks." That word is repeated three times.

The Greek word translated as "hell" is actually, *Gehenna* (a form of the Hebrew *ge Hinnom*, referring to the Valley of Hinnom). This was literally the burial place where dead bodies were constantly being burned in the ravine located to Jerusalem's immediate southwest. In Jesus' time, it was known as the location of abhorrent child sacrifice, a practice that provoked dire punishment in the Old Testament. Hinnom Valley became known Jerusalem's garbage dump, and it constantly smoldered. Here in the New Testament "Gehenna" appears twelve times and as a word for eternal postmortem punishment.ⁱⁱ So it was John, not the stranger performing exorcisms in Jesus' name, who did something wrong here. Very wrong.

Do you wonder why Jesus speaks so grotesquely to his disciples here? Even with a child on his lap? We are told "he did not speak to them except in parables" (4:33), please be assured, he is not literally advocating self-mutilation in this text. So, Jesus, why this kind of talk. As Flannery O'Connor, American novelist, short story writer of the early to mid- 20th century, who had a flare for the grotesque in her own writing, explains: "When you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."ⁱⁱⁱ

This shocking strangeness of Jesus' parables "keep coming, one after another, as if the point of such teaching is to pull the pins holding faith to a single definition and so make possible critical perspectives for change and growth." I'm quoting Dr. Robert Leigh Davis, in a line from his brilliant book titled, *Playful Wisdom*. He goes on to quote Jean-Jacques Surmond who uses the word *charism*, the gift of grace, which makes possible "an exodus from my own self-confirming presuppositions" and so a revelation of "the totally other in the neighbour."^{iv} It was this very gift of *charism* coming from Eldad, Medad, and the stranger healer that John brought to Jesus' attention that day. How can *they* have this gift? They don't fit our idea of God or how God works. Beloved Community: what pins are holding our faith back? Perhaps stopping the from allowing for the change and growth we need to prophesy and heal the world in Jesus' name? Or pins holding us back from seeing the Spirit working *through others*?

May we have ears to hear Jesus' shouting; and eyes to see the large and startling figures that Jesus is using to pull the pins that are holding our faith back from full throttle stepping out in Jesus' name. Where is the real problem, and where are we manufacturing trouble? As early

voting has already begun in one of the most polarized presidential elections in recent history; as our undocumented neighbors who labor on our farms and dairies and factories here in Central Wisconsin line up to receive help from the Mobile Mexican Consulate in our Fellowship Hall, as we participate in the CROP walk this afternoon to take steps to eradicate systemic poverty, linking arms with folks from 37 different denominations, united in this cause; and as climate change is already ending and upending lives, disproportionately of those least responsible for causing it, how are we doing on the unifying work of giving a cup of water to those who are thirsty?

I hear Jesus saying (shouting, really), STOP! Stop manufacturing trouble that fractures the community as it goes about doing Jesus' work. I hear God telling us to STOP looking at God's children with those lenses and guards, those flexed muscles and set jaws. Especially at those whom we think are not where they should be or are not doing it right.

I think it was this manufactured trouble that ticked Jesus off. We have a whole world to heal and reconcile, to bring peace and to do justice, and this? Perhaps you have heard the saying, "If you want to make God laugh, tell Her your plans." Today's lesson adds a reverse to this one: "If you want to make Jesus mad, try to stop someone who is doing Jesus' work." And on a positive note: "Do you want to make Jesus' day? Welcome the children. All who are vulnerable and in need. Make the most of the least of these." How many ways does Jesus have to teach us this, show us this, die for us and be raised from the dead, for us to get this?

Religion is *not* about heroic ego-driven leadership; nor about winning or being right. It's about a growth in willingness to be loved and to love. (St. Francis of Assisi 1182-1226). It's about Jesus' call for us to hear. Jesus shouting, when necessary: Be more eager to Love than to be right. As Jesus said in v. 40, "Whoever is not against us is for us." That is a word for us – anyone who identifies as a Christian or a Christ-follower. Our Lord is giving the green light, the "go sign" to anyone who is being the hands and feet of Christ, whether they identify as such or not. And is giving any of us the STOP sign when we start to narrow, constrain, or we hear ourselves saying, "they aren't doing it right" when they are doing the Lord's work, but not in the way that we would.

I will close my sermon today with a prayer titled, "Called beyond Comfort Zone" written by Walter Brueggemann. Let us pray:

We are among your called.

We have heard and answered your summons.

You have addressed us in the deep places of our lives.

In responsive obedience we testify,

*as we are able, to your truth as it
concerns our common life.*

*We thank you for the call,
for the burden of that call,
for the risk that goes with it,*

*for the joy of words given us
by your growing spirit, and
for the newness that sometimes comes
from our word.*

*We have indeed been in the counsel of your
summoning spirit,
and so we know some truth to speak.*

*But we are, as well, filled with rich
imagination of our own,
And our imagination is sometimes
matched and overmatched
by our cowardice,
by our readiness to please,
by our quest for well-being.*

*We are, on most days,
a hard mix of true prophet and wayward voice,
a mix of your call to justice
and our hope for shalom.*

*Here we are, as we are,
Mixed but faithful,
Compromised but committed,
anxious but devoted to you.*

*Use us and our gifts for
your newness that pushes beyond
all that we can say or imagine.
We are grateful for words given us;
we are more grateful for your word fleshed among us.^v*

ⁱ Philip Ruge-Jones, "Commentary on Mark 9:38-50," Working Preacher, September 30, 2018, as quoted in *Connections*, Year B, Volume 3, Ed. Green, Long, Powery,, Rigby, Sharp, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2021, p. 348.

ⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2007), vol. 2), p. 531.

ⁱⁱⁱ C. Clifton Black, theologian, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50>

^{iv} Robert Leigh Davis, *Playful Wisdom: Reimagining the Sacred in American Literature, from Walden to Gilead*, (Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, 2020), pp.11-112.

^v "Called Beyond Comfort Zone" Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2008), pp. 127-128.