

“Called Out from the Place of Outsider”  
Mark 9:33-41  
March 12, 2006  
The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

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They know better, they really do, but they just can't help themselves. They are arguing about greatness – who is first, who is the favorite, who has earned the most credit with Jesus. Gently, but firmly, Jesus reminds them one more time: whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. And then he takes a child – the least of the least, the lowest and least human of society – and, putting the child in the midst of them he says, “Whoever welcomes even one child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes even the one who sent me.”

But that doesn't mean we should welcome just anyone, does it? Immediately the disciples proudly report that they have stopped an unnamed exorcist who is *not* a follower of Jesus, but is capitalizing on the name on a freelance basis. But Jesus does not commend them. Again gently, again firmly, Jesus says they should not stop the man, because whoever isn't against him is for him. And then he puts it even more harshly: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these, it would be better if you lost your very life.” He is severely clear. It's better for you to lose yourself than to be responsible for someone being pushed away from Jesus. We cannot tell what God is doing in and through another human being, whether or they're important, whether or not they're pure, whether or not they're even Christian. Today we will explore what this means for us: what it means to follow Jesus by embracing the outsider.

Let's start by exploring how we deal with non-believers -- the equivalent of the unbelieving exorcist in our passage. I don't need to tell you this is a timely question. Long gone are the days when religious diversity meant Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian; Catholics were vaguely thought of as another faith. Today the reality is that all of us encounter non-Christians – not only Jews but Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others – constantly. We meet them at work, in the store, at school, in the neighborhood, even in our families. My guess is our sophisticated community is pretty welcoming of them ... in fact, we probably recoil at any close-minded bigotry and judgment that might be dished out in Jesus' name. We are the kind of people who go out of our way to remain open-minded. We are the kind of people who would, I dare say, agree with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks when he says, “The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to make me in his” (*The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 201). But

I wonder ... I wonder if we have erred on the side of blurring the image until we see nothing at all ... of being, to put it bluntly, mushy?

My earliest mentor, Jon Walton, who now pastors the First Presbyterian Church in New York, astutely captured this dilemma:

“[We say] there is a little bit of divine truth in every faith, that all are imperfect expressions of a divine reality greater than we can understand. And don’t many [of us] think, ‘Well, we all believe in the same God anyway, so it doesn’t really matter what you believe because we all want to get to the same place (meaning heaven)?’ The problem is that this would come as startling news to a Hindu or a Jew, a Buddhist or a Muslim. We don’t all believe in the same God as God is described in our differing scriptures. We understand the divine in different ways, and it does a discredit to the sincere beliefs of other faiths when we dismiss those differences so easily. Somehow, rather than dismiss the distinctiveness of other faiths, we need to find a way to honor those differences while preserving the claims of our own” (*Imperfect Peace: Teaching Sermons on Troubling Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), pp. 75-6).

This approach, of course, requires that we know what the claims of our faith are. And that may be the first great gift that embracing the outsider brings: clarity about our *own* faith:

“Our faith is that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and Savior of the world. He performed a unique and unrepeatable act of love and sacrifice on the cross, revealing the true nature of God’s love. God raised him in power, and by his resurrection we know how great is God’s ability to overcome evil and sin in this world. To know the story of Jesus is to have a special and beautiful knowledge of God and the way the universe hangs together, the meaning of the human experience, and the mystery that surrounds us all our days. Our imperative is to share that story with all who do not know it, and with all who will hear it. It is still the way to salvation, to wholeness, and to communion with God, which is what salvation means, being whole and one with God.” (Jon Walton, 76-7).

If we are to take seriously the outsider, we must know enough of what we believe to be in intelligent, differentiating conversation with those who follow a different path. This doesn’t mean that we are supposed to beat people over the head with our faith. Note well that Jesus *never* preaches polemically against other religions. The greatest enemy of the gospel is not other people’s faiths; it is our own idolatry, the kind that the disciples have when they worship ambition and greatness, the kind that the Pharisees have when they worship their cherished traditions and miss seeing the Messiah right in front of them, the kind the scribes have when they are so busy judging others that they miss the log in

their own eye. Indeed, it is more our actions than our dogma that will be judged by God. “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will not lose the reward,” which echoes the Master’s words when he said, whenever you gave the hungry something to eat, and clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned, “whatever you did to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did so unto me.”

Which leads us to the second blessing we receive when we embrace the outsider: we welcome Jesus himself, and often without knowing it. There is a biblical theme of the stranger bearing surprising gifts -- and bringing the very presence of God. “Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it,” says the letter to the Hebrews (13:2). In Genesis we read of Abraham’s own welcome to three strangers, who bring with them the astonishing news that Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, will have a child (Genesis 18). And in the gospels themselves, it is the resurrected Jesus who appears as a stranger to his friends (Luke 24:13ff; John 20:11ff). The outsider, the stranger, the foreigner, the beggar, the child, the most inconsequential guest ... in scripture they are the presence of God. “Whoever welcomes a little one in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

It must be said this is not always easy. The presence of the outsider requires things of us, and outsiders come in many forms. We enter a conversation with a foreigner, and we must relinquish the illusion that our point of view is the only option. We welcome “outsiders” like our aging parents or our children back into our homes, and we must relinquish the freedom of time we enjoyed. We do the hard work of confronting someone who has pushed us out and hurt us, and we must relinquish some of our wounds. We watch the news and see the devastating famine in Africa, or we visit a developing country and encounter the desperate poverty of thousands, and we relinquish our comfortable separation from children who are literally dying. Embracing the outsider requires things of us, and it can easily feel like more than we want to give. I love the story Kathleen Norris tells about the Russian monk who tells his young novitiate, “I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, ‘Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?’” (*Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p. 191).

And here’s the thing: it is indeed Jesus Christ, and he is here among us, all the time, if we will only see him. Jesus Christ is here, in the outsiders in our life, if we will only welcome them. And when we welcome him, it is we who will receive the blessings ... it is we who will be transformed. Amen.