

Seeing Jesus  
Mark 9:38-50  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
September 30, 2018  
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How very many sibling accusations have started with the words, “I saw...”

“I saw Johnny take an extra cookie.”

“I saw Mary out riding her bike when she was supposed to be studying.”

“I saw David take the money that was laying there on the desk.”

Even if those two little words aren’t used, the idea is often part of accusations whether between young siblings or grown ups.

And, once again, the disciples aren’t very different from us.

We remember that last week as Jesus tried to talk to them about his upcoming death, they had what they thought were more important things to discuss. While they were walking along the way with Jesus, traveling from place to place, they were discussing – or, more accurately, arguing – about who was greater.

And in today’s passage it seems they haven’t made much progress in the area of maturity of faith. But now, instead of fighting amongst themselves, they’ve pointed their energy outward.

In verse 38 we read, “John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’<sup>1</sup>

So, what was this about? Were they really worried that the other one who was using the name of Jesus wasn’t going to use it correctly? Were they worried that he would hurt their reputation or Jesus’? Were they worried that he would do harm to the ministry Jesus had been building? Did they see something in him, other than the fact that he wasn’t established as part of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:38, NRSV.

their group, that made them feel suspicious or have concern for the genuineness of this individual's healing effort?

Or was it something else? Were they worried he would take the attention away from Jesus (and from them)? Were they, perhaps, simply jealous? After all, they've proved their ability to be jealous – to fight, even among themselves, for first place. And if we would read further back in chapter 9 we would see that earlier Jesus had sent them out to heal and there had been an instance where the disciples failed to accomplish the task. Perhaps that failure was still in the forefront of their minds and caused them to be jealous of the one who could accomplish what they failed at *and* who even did it without being part of the inner circle.

For whatever reason, they came to Jesus complaining about what they saw.

But Jesus' response wasn't what they expected, or what they hoped for. Rather than getting upset...rather than affirming their suspicions...rather than stopping this other person from using his name...Jesus responded, "Do not stop him; 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."<sup>2</sup>

That answer sure wasn't what they were expecting!

And then, Jesus goes on, seeming to shift the conversation back to them. "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 or you were thrown into the sea."<sup>3</sup>

Strong language here. And let us remember, this is not a threat, but an admonition and a reminder that while the disciples might prefer to spend time looking at others and accusing them,

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:39-40, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:42, NRSV.

they were overdue for a long, honest look at themselves and the many ways they too often got in the way of others' faith.

And perhaps we are, too.

Because all too often we are so busy looking at the other, critiquing how they do something differently than we do, trying to prove that our way is the only way or at least the better way. Too often we spend so much energy on this that we forget to look at the ways that *we* could change, that *we* need to confess, that *we* have sinned. Too often we spend so much energy trying to accuse the other that we don't even realize the ways this very action hurts those around us.

And let's be honest – the disciples weren't likely actually concerned that this other person was doing something wrong. They weren't likely actually concerned that he was using Jesus' name poorly or that he was misrepresenting Jesus. They were most likely concerned that he was doing it right...that he was better, more faithful, more powerful than they were. This wasn't a matter of them having to draw a boundary because it was time to name sin or call out evil. This was a matter of them trying to create a boundary to separate themselves, to make themselves part of an exclusive group because they didn't know how to welcome in someone who was doing it differently, or perhaps more importantly, better.

Yes, there are times when sin and evil need to be called out. There are times when we need to name the sins of the community, of the church, of individuals, of our culture, of our world. There is a time a place for that. But that is not what this text is about. Rather here we have an instance where the disciples were so worried about their own identity and their own power that they were unable to appreciate the good work of a faithful person outside their group.

And the same too often happens in our day and age, even among those of us in the same families and workplaces, neighborhoods and churches.

But, church, ours is not a community that is meant to be competitive, but rather cooperative. Ours is not a community that says we must all look the same or act the same or serve the same, but rather than says that we should all come authentically as ourselves and bring the best of who we are and the gifts that we have been given. Ours is not a community where only one way works or where one gift is the one we are all striving for, but rather a community where we need all of us and our varied ways of navigating this world on behalf of Jesus.

Admittedly this isn't easy. Admittedly it is easier and more comfortable to hole up in our corners with those who are like us, who see the world the same way, who have gone through the same experiences, who have admired the same leaders. But, we are reminded, as Professor Karoline Lewis writes, "that we are all in the same proverbial boat.... And we need to stick together, not for the sake of an affront against, a battle lodged, or a fight for, but for the sake of camaraderie and collegiality. As soon as our denominations, our church, our faith, becomes that which we need to defend, we've given up on true dialogue and openness to conversation. We've shut the doors and decided that our confessions are better than others."<sup>4</sup>

But our calling isn't to be fighting against each other but to be working together for the bringing about of God's reign. Our calling is to bring our variety of gifts to the same task – the task of sharing the love of God with the world, the task of bringing wholeness where there is brokenness, the task of opening wider the doors that all may come in and know of God's love. And, friends, we do this best when we do this together.

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<sup>4</sup> Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3694>.

Can you imagine how this conversation have been different if the disciples had come to Jesus and said, “We saw someone do something wonderful in your name!” How would this conversation have been different if instead of looking to Jesus to scold or admonish the outsider who was healing, they had instead pointed him out because they thought they should meet him. What if John had come to Jesus and said, “Jesus, Jesus – you’ve got to see what this guy is doing. He is doing wonderful healing acts and he is doing them in your name. Let’s go meet him. Let’s see if he’d like to have dinner. Let’s see what we can learn from him”?

Friends, we have a choice. We can look at the other – whether it be a familiar other across our family table or down the pew or an unfamiliar other along our route to work or in another country – and we can greet them with suspicion and accusation looking only for the places where we feel threatened. Or we can look at the other with a hopeful expectation – looking for the ways that we can learn, that we can grow, that we can be made better by their presence...and most of all, looking for the ways we see Jesus in them.

What would happen if we looked not for our strengths or those of another but for the presence of Jesus in all of us? What would happen if we looked for the ways that we could affirm the life-giving nature of Jesus in the other? And what would happen if we would commit to living in ways that reflected Jesus in ourselves?

Just think what the world would be like if people looked at us, or more accurately looked beyond us, and found they were seeing Jesus and in seeing him, found that they were coming face to face with the love of God.

May it be so.