

**WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE? MARK 9:38-50; SEPTEMBER 27, 2015;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

One scholar, commenting on today's text says the experience of being loved can lead to an unhealthy feeling of specialness, which questions others (as if God's love were somehow limited) while at the same time fails to be self-critical. ⁱ

The teacher's pet, the intern, the boss's lieutenant – today, the disciples of Jesus – are susceptible to the disease of blind elitism: depending for survival on a sense of one's own self-importance while freely judging others.

Even at this early stage in their journey to Jerusalem, the disciples have given ample evidence of suffering from this affliction. They have designated themselves Jesus' personal body-guards and gate-keepers, trying to shield him from the very people he seeks to serve: the poor, the outcast, the sick and lonely, women and children. The disciples complain to Jesus that a religious leader claiming allegiance to him is casting out demons. Indeed, immediately preceding today's story, the disciples lament their inability to exorcise an evil spirit from a child. But rather than reaching out to this kindred spirit who perhaps could teach them a thing or two, the disciples want to banish him.

What is it that keeps people from being magnanimous, open-hearted, and generous and makes them petty, stingy and suspicious? This problem pre-dates the Gospel of Mark; it goes all the way back to Genesis, to the story of Cain and Abel.

It is a problem that has afflicted the church from the beginning and afflicts it still. So good for Mark for putting it in front of us; for letting us see what Jesus thinks about our penchant for drawing the line too closely around ourselves and those whom we are willing to let in to our select club.

The importance of today's story is that it addresses this character defect not just as it appears in the lives of individuals but as it burrows into the life of groups and organizations, institutions and even nations, as we are now witnessing in the world's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The irony of many in United States, an immigrant nation, objecting to the recent wave of refugees making their way to our shores now, is not one of our finer moments.

The challenge reading today's Scripture is to identify with the self-important disciples; to see ourselves in them, to see mirrored there our own character defects.

Often our response is to condemn the disciples, unaware of the log in our own eye. But for Mark, they are stand-ins for members of his church, thus, for you and me. Mark is directing his story today not to people in general or outsiders of the church but to the very people who run and support it.

I also want to consider this story from a wider perspective: a world fragmented by religious ideology and war and a nation split not only by liberal and conservative differences but something deeper and more pervasive: a Trojan horse of fear that mimics truth and infects the body politic with bias, bigotry and xenophobia.

Award winning author Marilynne Robinson, in a recent essay, talks about a deep and pervasive fear in the United States that manifests itself in robust gun sales and aggressive lobbying to thwart the regulation of guns.

Robinson's argument, which helps understand the disciples' reaction to the exorcist, is based on seeing the United States as a Christian nation. Some think of us as Christian, she says, because they are themselves Christian and descendants of immigrants who came here from Christian nations; some call themselves Christian to say they do not fit any other category or religion; and some say the US is Christian to set themselves apart from the wider culture.

The mere association of so much of the nation with the Christian faith, says Robinson, gives us considerable responsibility for Christianity's good name in the world. Yet, if we were concerned about the reputation of the faith we espouse, and with which much of the nation aligns, we should think more carefully about associating Jesus with ignorance, intolerance, and belligerent nationalism – the loudest voices in the culture claiming Christian values.ⁱⁱ

If we are a Christian nation (or predominantly a Christian nation) Robinson says we ought to find ourselves at odds with the incessant mantras of fear that fill the nation's airwaves and occupy our online outlets.

She reminds us that we are instructed from our childhood to say, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for Thou art with me." And we hear the resounding promise of Jesus at his resurrection, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." Our view of history is not that it is driven by random fate or cyclical repetition but by God's linear trajectory to a final resolution and victory for the forces of good.ⁱⁱⁱ

How, then, do we so easily fall prey to fear and to the merchants of fear-based politics, theology and economics? Fear-based thinking, legislation and policies that allow the hoarding by a few of the fruits of our remarkable productivity while many tread desperately in the floodwaters of economic hardship? For Robinson, the issue is a matter of spiritual life or death: we are taught as followers of Jesus, she says, that we are not to fear the death of our bodies but the loss of our souls. That's the issue Mark raises today.

And so what appears on the surface like a simple question to Jesus about who is in and who is out is, in fact, a much deeper question about losing our souls.

This is a question that ought to be raised by every North American congregation, as the Pope has alluded to in his visit last week. Where do we as Americans and as a Christian congregation draw the line when it comes to extending God's love and hope? How far are we willing to go, how diverse?

I would urge us to consider that anywhere we hear or see the line being drawn to keep anyone out is in all likelihood the attempt of the forces of fear to isolate and discount someone whom Jesus welcomes into the kingdom of God. The line that needs to be drawn is the line of faith against the insidious agenda of fear.

I am not suggesting that the ethic Mark presents today is that of a mushy, warm-hearted and fuzzy inclusiveness – you know the idea that if it doesn't hurt anybody it doesn't matter what you do or think or say. In fact, such so-called openness is a sign of intellectual sloth and a recipe for chaos.

What Jesus says to the disciples when they seek to draw the line against someone who was doing something worthwhile is that “anyone who is not against us is for us.” Matthew’s Jesus says it differently, he says, “whoever is not with me is against me.” In Mark the “us” refers to the disciples; in Matthew the “me” refers to Jesus. We can conclude that it is apparently permissible to be outside the bounds of the disciples, to have less than perfect membership credentials, but it is not permissible to be against Jesus himself. That’s entirely different than mushy-headed-anything-goes-tolerance.

How do we get on the right side of Jesus? Perhaps the important thing that contributes to the one true church is not correct or orthodox doctrine but matching our words with our deeds, rejoicing whenever good work is done, regardless of who the agent is; Jesus’ kingdom is bigger than our church’s little definitions, disciples are known as much by their offering a cup of cold water as by their affirmation of a creed. In fact, I would say the true test is not what we say or think or feel (liberal/conservative; Christian/non-Christian) but what we do, since what we do or don’t do is what impacts the lives of others.^{iv}

Note that the dramatic and harsh sayings that follow the disciples’ objection to the itinerant exorcist introduce a razor-sharp self-awareness and self-criticism for Jesus’s followers.

Instead of worrying about the ministries of outsiders, the disciples are here directed to reflect on their own style of life and ministry. Is there anything they say or do that would serve as a stumbling block for the children of the church or new believers? Having a huge millstone strung around one’s neck and being thrown into the sea while it may be hyperbole underscores the seriousness of the issue.

“Everyone will be salted with fire,” probably intends to warn of the faith testing fire of persecution and trials the early church was to face. Disciples are urged not to lose their distinctiveness or commitment to the kingdom of God and merely adopt the norms and values of the society. Otherwise, the impact of the disciples upon the culture which is precisely what they (and we) are elected to do will be negated. “Be at peace with one another,” is a not so subtle reminder that if their lot is to face trials and tribulations they do not need to be arguing about who is the greatest but rather how they can stand up for one another.^v

So where *do we* draw the line? For me, today’s text is a call to expand our mission to the least of these.

It reminds us when we are considering emerging missions that the ethic of service trumps that of our beloved intellectual inquiry.

I said trumps, not rejects or negates.

It is interesting that just when we have met and fulfilled our four year pledge to the Westminster Economic Development Initiative, though we will continue to support WEDI, now that WEDI is going strong, it is time to discern where and with whom we are being called to serve on some new frontier of mission.

The mission outreach team, over the summer, has developed a process to identify emerging mission opportunities; since we cannot respond to every need the question is where in particular is there a fit, where is God calling us to reach out and make a difference. Because of our presence on the West Side we are aware of emerging mission opportunities there and because of the diligence and leadership of some in our congregation we are discovering more and more opportunities on the East Side of Buffalo.

And, we have been invited to partner with Jericho Road ministries, a West Side Pentecostal congregation comprised mostly of African immigrants and an evangelical global mission agency in a medical mission for children in east Congo. The Congo was torn by civil war that killed seven million people in an unfathomable reign of genocide. And you also know perhaps that some of our recent members are Congolese who came to the US and found their way to Westminster; they are Presbyterians because our church had missionaries in the region years ago and established a presence there.

Consider our multi-faith work; at a time when Israel's relations with Palestine and this nation are at an all time low, we have embarked upon a four congregation partnership with North Presbyterian, Temple Beth Zion and Shir Shalom Congregation; the purpose of these Christian/Jewish relationships is to seek mutual understanding, find ways to join efforts in service and to take an educational trip to Israel in a year or two to visit the land of our faith as well as the occupied territories.

The world is too big, there is too much need, to think that we are exempt from bringing the hope, healing and peace of God's love to those who suffer in other lands; and the world is too small to think that the definition of "our neighbor" whom we are called to serve does not apply to anyone beyond the city limits of Buffalo.

How far and wide or how narrow and close we draw the line of our mission service and partnerships is not merely a question of what resources we have or the need in our city; it is a question of who we are willing to work with, it is a question of getting out of our comfort zone to meet and serve people different than us and partner with folks whose theology may be conservative or even of another faith.

How far and wide or how narrow and close we draw the line of our mission service and partnerships is finally a question of keeping or losing our souls.

We can preserve the campus and keep it looking pretty; we can gather here on Sunday mornings for glorious liturgy and worship but if it doesn't lead us to some hurting child in this community or halfway around the world; and if we don't join hands and resources with some non-Presbyterians; our souls could be in greater danger than we know.

There's a story Jesus told about a father with two sons whom he asked to go into his field and work; the one who was clean cut and got good grades pledged himself to the work; the one who had body piercings and hung out with low lifes and losers told his father to forget it; but then went and worked.

Which one Jesus asked did the will of his father; the one who said all the right things or the one who took the right action? "Truly, I tell you," Jesus said, "tax collectors and whores go into the kingdom of God before you good ones."

It is an exciting time to be part of a Christian congregation in Buffalo; it is an exciting time to be part of this congregation. There's a lot at stake, including our spiritual health and well-being. But then why play small? Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, 1993) 53.

ⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, "Fear," *The New York Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, 28

ⁱⁱⁱ Robinson, 29

^{iv} William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, September 2015, 50.

^v Brueggemann, 54.