

**“Who’s In and Who’s Out.”**

**Mark 9:38-50**

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**A sermon preached by Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden**

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Someone has said, “The disciples in Mark’s gospel are enough to make one sort of an atheist!” Shocked? Let me try to explain why this may be so.

The word “disciple” is most often understood as a pupil or a follower of a teacher or leader. When there is a problem in education we usually ask what has made it so difficult for a group of students to learn. In the case of the disciples, the answer is fairly easy to deduce. What Jesus is attempting to teach them – in Mark chapter 9 – is clearly something that they don’t want to learn. We could debate, whether or not many of Jesus’ disciples, including ourselves, are willing to learn this lesson recorded in today’s gospel lesson.

What the gospel of Mark presents is Jesus trying to teach his disciples that the inevitable course or destiny of his life is that he will suffer and die. A few verses before today’s gospel text, Mark records Jesus teaching his disciples in these words: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed he will rise again.” By implication, Jesus is trying to get the disciples to understand that the destiny of their lives could be the same as his. But the disciples have a learning problem with this teaching – basically, they don’t want to learn it!

Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts have described what was happening to the disciples as “the problem of resistance.” Let me illustrate what happens: There are patients who say that they want a therapist’s help but then proceed to find ways to resist getting help because they want to avoid facing certain things about themselves.

Journalists speak of “selective inattention” and say that avoidance and denial are two ways of being inattentive to something we would rather not hear. Another way psychologists view this phenomenon is to describe it as “distraction.” Family

therapist Virginia Satir wrote that “distraction” becomes a powerful defense against hearing something we don’t want to hear. The disciple, John, and the other disciples didn’t want to hear Jesus’ teaching that he was destined to suffer and die. For a while John had tried to distract Jesus from his teaching on the destiny of discipleship by getting him into a discussion of some ordinary and very human competitiveness – a discussion about who was the greatest among them.

In case Jesus wanted to get back into this “suffering and death” talk that the disciples resisted hearing, believe it or not, John continues with his strategy of distraction in today’s gospel lesson, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” The rest of today’s reading shows that John’s resistance and his strategy of distraction did not work. Nor does it work today when some of us – worrying about what discipleship means for us – do the same kind of thing, hoping that it doesn’t mean what we think it does.

Jesus jumps on John’s obvious ploy to distract him from his teaching, and uses it as a teachable moment to reinforce another important lesson. That lesson is this: relationships in the community of faith are utterly different from those of the surrounding world. Jesus responds to the disciples’ irritation that someone else was casting out demons in his name. He responds to their outburst, “Lord, that fellow’s got a nerve to be doing that ... casting out demons ... Lord, he’s not following us ... Lord, he’s different; he doesn’t belong; he doesn’t look like us; he doesn’t talk like us ... Oh, we’re not prejudiced, Lord ... we’re just concerned that he doesn’t fit here ... and, most of all, Lord, we’re concerned that he’s doing *our* job.”

Notice Jesus’ response: Jesus offers an option to their “Come on, Jesus, let’s choose sides” reaction. Jesus says that there is no point forbidding anyone from doing a mighty work in his name. Jesus cites the principle on which this is based: “The person who is not *against* us is *for* us.” In this response Jesus radically redefines relationships among his followers. Jesus turns the argument “Who’s in and

who's out?" upside down. "Imagine something different!" Jesus invites his followers to consider. Imagine who's in is actually out, and who's out is actually in! What if the first aren't first and the last aren't last? What if there are no thrones? No titles? No degrees? What if the dividing lines aren't carved in stone? What if the kingdom of God is not so much about doors and walls and gates and fences and boundaries ...not so much about color, ethnicity, age, class, status? What if the domain of God is organized by altogether different principles: whoever is not against us is in; whoever gives us a cup of water is in; whoever keeps a little one from Jesus is out?

What we see here in this very difficult and rather troubling gospel lesson today is Jesus taking on the twelve for their overzealous gate keeping. The status distinctions that the disciples are looking for (greater, lesser, in, out) just do not exist in Jesus' idea of a faith community. Bear in mind that in the passage immediately preceding today's gospel lesson, the disciples are seen arguing about who is the greatest. And what was Jesus' reaction? Jesus nixed their idea that there could be elitism in the kingdom. Then, in today's lesson as they continue their attempt to distract Jesus from his teaching by suggesting they are on a different side from a person casting out demons, Jesus nixes the idea of exclusivity. No elitism. No exclusivity. Neither are features of God's way. "Who's in and who's out is not a thing to be obsessing over," Jesus seems to say. It's not the point. It may even be none of our business!

It's no good pointing fingers today at the twelve disciples of the first century and accusing them of Attention Deficit Disorder. We respond to Jesus as Lord and Savior ... We profess faith in Jesus as the Son of God ... We think of Jesus as a great teacher sent from God, but let's be honest ... As we think of Jesus' teaching in our present-day context, he takes on the image of a patient, kind teacher working with inattentive students. As one reads the gospels closely, it's hard to imagine a time when Jesus' disciples did not need extra lessons on the dangers of exclusivity.

Too often the sad truth is that the church has been preoccupied with who's in and who's out. Generation after generation the Church has poured precious energies down that drain. Some examples: In mid-twentieth century mainline religion, distinctions were drawn around divorce, gambling, Sabbath keeping, and race. In evangelical churches, dancing, drinking and smoking marked the line.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there were those who pursued their picketing and protesting against pro-choicers, pro-lifers, and some die-hards, of course, who continued railing against women who so effectively minister from our pulpits. Within our own United Methodist family there were those who constantly protested the spending of dollars on what they called "foreign missions" when [quote] "there is a mission in our own back yard." This was nothing less than another attempt to assert "who's in and who's out." May God purge our hearts and seal our lips against ever suggesting such limitations on the use of the church's purse and personnel to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ across the globe.

Who's in and who's out? The words of Jesus, "The person who is not *against* us is *for* us," provide the gospel text for United Methodism's slogan, *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*. Jesus' words are a testimony to openness and cooperation among Christian denominations and between Christians and persons of other faiths. The number and variety of communities that work in Jesus' name reveals that there are infinite ways to live and proclaim the good news. Beyond our primary commitment to follow Jesus, what is most important in our making disciples and transforming the world is a disposition of inclusiveness toward one another.

Who's in and who's out? Mark's emphasis in today's lesson on Jesus' radical inclusivity is a timely one in our church and in our American society which at present seem to be manifesting some of the ugly tendencies of exclusivity and gate-keeping. In response, Mark, I suggest, deliberately presents for us today an Un-gentle, Un-meeek and Un-mild Jesus who dares to stand in the face of the disciples then, and in the face of the church today with some of the harshest words of the gospel. There

will come a great and glad day when these words of Jesus better be found written on our hearts. If not, we may be in for some huge surprises.

It may serve our spirits well to envision that Day of the Lord in the way the New Testament presents it as a heavenly feast. In keeping with this eschatological picture, Mark seeks to present relationships between those who would follow Jesus as “roundtable” relationships. The kingdom of God is more like a family dinner table than a cafeteria line where some are first and others last, where some are in and others out.

Imagine yourself part of a group spiritual exercise ...part of a large circle with everyone facing in. Then imagine God as being at the center of the circle. Your group facilitator tells everyone in the circle to begin to move toward the center, toward God. As you move toward the center, the circle, of course, begins to shrink in size until each one of you ends up shoulder to shoulder. Then hear the spiritual leader say: “The lesson is this: You can’t get closer to God without, at the same time, getting closer to one another.”

As Christians, it isn’t our job to run around telling people who’s in and who’s out. Because, yes, there are people in this world who are different from us. In some cases, they’re really different from us. But the good news is that God’s love is for all of us. So together, shoulder to shoulder, and hand in hand, let’s live as the one people that God has made us to be.

May God help all of us to deal with our spiritual challenges of inattention and our strategies of distraction that we may hear these distinct and disturbing words of the gospel today ... that we may take them to heart ... and that we may change our thinking and behaving accordingly. May we honestly and with integrity face the cost of radical discipleship in an ever-increasing diverse society. May we never ask again ... not in this church and not in any sacred place ... may we *never* be found asking again, “Who’s in and who’s out?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.