

**Pentecost B18 2015**  
**September 27**  
**Central Presbyterian, Montclair**  
**David Noble**

**Mark 9:38-50**

<sup>38</sup>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>39</sup>But Jesus said, "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. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

<sup>42</sup>"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 and you were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup>If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. <sup>45</sup>And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. <sup>47</sup>And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

<sup>49</sup>"For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup>Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

A

I would like to introduce you to a friend named Jack. Jack was the longtime music director of a church I served in Michigan. Jack had been the music director at that church for many years and he was weary and wanted to retire. At age 75 no one could blame him. Before I met Jack he was described to me as the spiritual leader of that church. The pastor at the time was unable to lead due to personal issues, and Jack was able to not only work well with that pastor but to be a source of grace and hope and mercy for a congregation of 600 people.

I was the one who was hired to replace Jack, so he could finally retire and let go of all the responsibilities he had so ably fulfilled for so many years. Jack was beloved by his choir as well as the congregation. And Jack wasn't going anywhere. This was his church. This was his family. Even though he was retiring, he and his wife, Zora, intended to live out the rest of their lives in this congregation.

Now when pastors retire they rarely stay in the congregation they served. And for good reasons. It makes it very hard when a new pastor arrives and the old pastor is still there. Fireworks are often the result. So I took up my new position, Jack's old position, and within a week he was at my door to meet with me. My stomach flipped over. Would this be the opening salvo in a struggle over who was in charge?

Jack said he was leaving the church for a few months. He knew it would be hard for me if he stayed around. He wanted to sing and to play his trombone in the church like he always did, but he was going to take a sabbatical from his beloved congregation so I could establish myself and my program. Then, he said, give me a call and we'll talk about when I should return.

A few months later he was back, leading the bass section, singing the bass solos, playing his trombone in the instrumental ensemble every other Sunday, and running interference for me

when I wanted to try something new. And that's what Jack did until I left 17 years later. He was a fountain of mercy for me.

B

Mark's gospel tell us that James was complaining to Jesus one day. James had noticed a stranger out on the street who was healing people in Jesus' name. Who did this healer think he was that he could just show up out of nowhere and start doing ministry right there in their own territory? Despite James telling this guy to get lost, he kept right on healing people anyway.

This story reminds me of my friend Jack who was so merciful to me, unlike the disciple James who wanted the competition to go away. It was just a few days before this scene took place that James and the other disciples were asked to heal a man they had met on the street. Jesus wasn't around at the time so they gave it their best shot. They did everything they could think of to heal the sick man but nothing worked and he went away disappointed. The disciples were embarrassed. They felt like failures. Then along comes this stranger who is successfully healing people and they feel embarrassed all over again. He hasn't even been following Jesus like they have. He doesn't have the credentials to do what he's doing, yet there he is doing the job.

"Let him be," Jesus says. "He's working for me, let him be."

C

Before I went to seminary I worked in Utah for six years. I was a member of a little Presbyterian church and was called to be one of the four elders there. The 60 people in my church were the only nonMormons in the town of 1500. We were the only nonMormon church in 50,000 square miles. A little different from New Jersey where churches seem to be everywhere. Presbyterians moved into Utah in the 1800's alongside the Mormons in order to help them establish schools and colleges. Presbyterians were the school system from Idaho through Utah to New Mexico for many, many years.

Then the Methodists started showing up. And the Disciples of Christ. And the United Church of Christ and a whole host of other churches. We Presbyterians had put in the blood and the tears and now these other churches were popping up attracting members in the same cities and towns we had been in for years.

Then I attended a presbytery meeting and was surprised. The Presbyterians of Utah had welcomed all these other churches and had created a special organization called Shared Ministries. All these churches held their individual meetings in the morning and in the afternoon they all came together as the Shared Ministry of Utah. They combined their resources to reach out to the whole state, something none of them could do adequately on their own. All these different churches contributed toward a fund that would establish a new church somewhere in Utah every year- one year the Presbyterians, the next year the Methodists, and the next year the United Church of Christ. I see that as the mercy of God at

work where there could have been jealousy or battles over turf. The Lord's work was being done, and everyone was satisfied with that.

D

We're in the process of change right now as a congregation. At a meeting last Sunday after church, the latest report from New Beginnings was shared. Several good questions were asked during that meeting, and one that has especially stuck with me was the question, "If the New Beginnings process is going to redefine our purpose as a church, does that mean we might have to give up some of the things we are doing now?" I said yes, it does. We will become focused on a new direction that will lead us to do new things and to leave behind other things that no longer fit in with our new ways.

That will happen successfully only if we are merciful with one another. And Jesus describes what he means by that.

You are my people, he says. Jesus has called us and we have come to follow him, not because we're perfect, but because he is. We are imperfect followers. We get in our own way sometimes, we get in his way sometimes. But despite that he still calls us his people and embraces us as those who bear his name.

Others see that, he says. Others see that we want to live for the sake of Jesus Christ, to be his agents who heal and seek justice and do good, and they may be inspired to reach out to support us and encourage us- to give us a cup of cold water. But keep your head on, Jesus says. The mercy that others may show us should be an example of the mercy we show the world and each other.

Take a good look at yourself, Jesus says. On the one hand, believe that you are loved so much, that Jesus will not let you go. And on the other hand, don't get a big head because his love for you is so great. Check yourself. Do you tend to say "No, not on my watch?" or "I know better, I have the training, the education, the background, the "whatever it is" that makes me the expert?"

A better way is to step back and ask how Jesus can be shared with more people, in more situations; how more lives can be healed and hope made strong, how new ways might multiply the good news. Being merciful involves self-awareness and recognition of how we may make ourselves the focus rather than the mission of Jesus to our community. Be aware, Jesus is saying, be aware of how you can step aside and let others take a role in proclaiming the good news in their own ways.

And being Christians, being a church, Jesus says, is challenging. Sometimes it may be more than challenging, even painful, as we live our lives as followers of Jesus. We are called to a distinctive way of life—a way of respecting others, of loving the unlovable, of raising up the lowly, of welcoming strangers, of being vulnerable to those in need, of setting aside our own egos for the sake of others, of self-sacrifice so needs can be met.

Do I have to say that this distinctive way of life is being challenged right now? This political season is not bringing out the best in our country, not even in the followers of Jesus. We will be salted with fire right now if we dare to stand up and say it's wrong to humiliate others, it's wrong to treat migrants and refugees with disrespect and disdain. The fire of persecution is going to come our way if we stand up for racial harmony, and justice for the oppressed. There is a mood today, a bitter, angry, mood to tell the guy who just showed up on the corner to get lost because he's not one of us. Mercy is in short supply.

Don't let that be this church's problem. Build up mercy in this congregation. Be merciful at work and in school and with your family and friends. Make room for others to live out their faith in Jesus Christ in their own ways. Remove stumbling blocks when you can. Enable this church to serve this society not so it pleases us or comforts us, but so the distinctive, contrasting ways of Jesus are seen and experienced and make a difference.

Be salty.

Be merciful.

Be at peace.