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## **All Grace, and Nothing But God's Grace**

### **Mark 9:38-50, NRSV, emended**

John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your Name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.' 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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.

'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. 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 Gehenna to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; for it is better for you to enter Life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; for it is better for you to come into the Reign of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into Gehenna-- where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. For everyone will be salted with salt. Salt is good. But, if salt has lost its saltiness, how can it be seasoned? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

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Beloved, what if we're wrong? What if, somehow, we've missed the boat? We didn't pick up the cues? We've misunderstood everything about God and this life and faith? What if we find ourselves inside the pearly gates, and God pulls us aside and tells us that we've been wrong all the years. What if God tells us the Muslims got it right and the Lutherans had been wrong? Augustana college professor Richard Swanson tells a story about this. A Jewish colleague proposed this scenario to a Lutheran professor. The Lutheran asked a few clarifying questions: "It is God who takes me aside?" Yes, yes. "And it is inside the pearly gates?" That is correct. "Ah," the Lutheran responds, "Then this would prove Martin Luther had it right from the beginning: it is all grace and nothing but God's grace."

The middle of Mark's gospel is a bit of a funk. The disciples are so sure that they alone have it right. They argue—or ignore—Jesus when it comes to the true vocation of the Messiah. They argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest. They stop those attempting to do good in Jesus's name because, and this is a powerful sentiment, that person wasn't in their group. What a thought! Not that the other exorcist wasn't

following *Jesus*, but that he wasn't following "us." Wrong brand, apparently. How odd that the other exorcist was doing the right thing, but the disciples determined it was somehow for the wrong reason? It is worth remembering that, by the time Mark records these words, the Christian movement had become large enough that there was controversy and conflict within the community. The people wonder, how do we know we've got it right? What if we get it wrong? What Jesus tells the disciples—tells the community—is a statement of welcome and openness: "If they're not against us, they're with us." But does that answer the underlying anxiety? What if we're wrong?

And so Mark writes... well, actually, Mark just seems to string along the hardest and weirdest things Jesus ever said, one after the other, linked not by a common topic but just a random key word. Stumbling, or fire, or salt. And yet there is in undercurrent in each saying, a drum beat that pounds out the same question: "What if we're wrong?"

What if we're wrong?  
What if we're wrong?  
What if we're wrong about Jesus?  
What if we're wrong about the Messiah?  
What if Rome crushes us all?  
What if we're wrong about sin, or pain, or evil?  
What if we're wrong?

Often, we draw the line of right and wrong along some kind of fanaticism. On one side is faith, on the other, a cult. Calls for violence, calls for withdrawal from society, call for body mutilation—these are all too extreme to be proper faith. That is basically the disciples' point, right? In this middle section of Mark's gospel, we see the disciples struggling with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And, while we often portray them as bumbling, fumbling, always messing up, the reality is, we identify with them deeply. Jesus says the Messiah is to suffer and die, how can they consent to that reality? That is too fanatical. And then, here is this saying, which is so uncomfortable—about cutting off body parts lest we be thrown into the burning trash heap of Gehenna. No wonder the gospels don't record a response from the disciples. How can this be right?

Although... many of us will experience the kind of loss in our lives where losing a limb would seem so much preferable to the heartache we will endure. Would we not give up a limb for more time with a loved one? Is this not a cliché for a reason? Would we not like to give up our tongue in an effort to take back something hurtful we've said? Would we not like to avoid the brokenness that isn't just in the world, but that we are expertly skilled at propagating? It isn't that in cutting off a hand, a foot we are destined for eternal life because of our demonstrated devotion to God. No, it is what our heartache tells us about God. How it reveals for us the truth of God, that the mutilation of his own body and the breaking of his own spirit is how God's grace enters the world. What is it that Leonard Cohen sings? "Ring the bells that still can ring, / Forget your perfect offering. / There's a crack in everything, / That's how the light gets in."

What a thing to be right about, isn't it, that faith is just chock full of contradictions: the least are the greatest, the poor are the rich, true heroes are those who suffer for the sake of others, the broken are the whole, what is preserved is what is lost, and what is lost is what is found. It is all grace, and nothing but God's grace. We may get it wrong, but if we get just this one thing right, it will be enough. It is grace, all grace, and nothing but God's grace.

It turns out, Beloved, that we have a faith that assumes we've got it wrong, and that that is precisely when we get it right. I mean, what is that, if not faith? It is the fragile thread on which we build our lives. It is the trust that when all the cards are on the table, when the jig is up, when we are revealed for the frauds and charlatans and abject failures we truly are, when our fanaticism fails us and our indifference, too...that that will be the moment we are also revealed as the truly Beloved of God, heirs of grace.

Where, then, does that leave us, Beloved? Well, actually, it leaves us in the beautiful space where we can risk being wrong. We can welcome the one who calls on Jesus' name, but doesn't look like it. We can open our table, proclaim a welcome to the washing of the feet that presupposes nothing but God's grace, all God's grace, and nothing but God's grace. It isn't that we go out and do evil, but that we test the ends of our carefully held beliefs *about ourselves*. We hold them up not against others, not against the carefully crafted yardsticks of our culture and society, but against the measure of God's contradictory, endless, lavish grace. It is nothing but God's grace. All grace.

Amen.