

What to Love Loosely, What to Hold Tightly

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Text: Mark 9:38-50

These disciples still don't get it. Over the past few weeks we have heard Jesus speaking with them about what it means for him to be the Messiah, the anointed one, chosen by God to deliver God's people. Jesus the Messiah is not going to be accepted and honored by all people, elevated to prominence and power. Jesus says his path leads to disgrace and suffering on the cross, to the tomb, and then, after three days to resurrection. Jesus' path is a downward journey, so that he can stand by and with those who suffer, so that he can be the savior of all people.

But the disciples don't get it. They squabble over who gets to be second in command, and so Jesus takes a little child and says, "See her? See this little person the world has forgotten about and pressed to the margins? If you want to be anything in God's kingdom, then welcome her, receive her, give her the place of honor. Don't you see? That's what the kingdom is about." But still they don't get it.

In today's reading, John speaks up and wants Jesus to convene a meeting of the credentialing committee. There's an unlicensed exorcist abroad, he says, somebody who *isn't part of their group*, who has the gall to be out there, healing people in the name of Jesus. Who does he think he is? Whatever his story might be, John says, we really have to put a stop to all this business of helping people without the proper certification. Otherwise, and I shudder at the thought, folks like this might go right on healing, and we can't have that!

John doesn't get it. He thinks the grace of God—the liberating power that makes the blind see, the deaf hear, and that brings good news to the poor—is something that has to be channeled through worldly structures of power and authority. He's still caught up in the power game, thinking Jesus the Messiah came not to serve, but to be served. And so Jesus corrects him. When someone experiences how powerful and healing my name can be, Jesus says, do you think they're going to turn around and bad-mouth me? It's not about whether someone's on our team, he says. It's about whether we're working for the same thing. Even somebody who does as small a kindness for the kingdom as giving you disciples a cup of water will not be forgotten.

What Jesus says last in this passage speaks to this as well. Salt is salt is salt. It can't lose its saltiness, without ceasing to be salt. The healings that others perform in Jesus' name—that's salt. You know salt by its taste, no matter where it might come from. But arguing over who's in, who's out, and who gets to be in charge? That's not salt. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another," Jesus says. Because when you're trying to guard the boundaries of God's kingdom rather than expand its territory, you've missed the point.

Do you remember that little child Jesus picked up last week? He's still holding that child, putting her at the center of attention, the place of honor in the circle of his disciples. She's the stand-in representative of all the lonely and forgotten people that need the grace, healing, and hope, the good news of the nearness of God's kingdom.

And as he holds her in his arms, Jesus says just how terrible it would be, how utterly worthy of condemnation, for his disciples to put a stumbling block in front of someone like her, the least and the lost that Jesus values. Better to be dragged to the bottom of the ocean than to stand between someone in need and the grace of God. Better to cut off your limbs, pluck out your eyes, he says, than to suffer the judgment you would deserve for doing this.

And it made me think of those who live with the hurts they suffered as children —Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, who came reluctantly this week into the public eye to tell her story, into an onslaught of threats and derision that she didn't deserve, whatever you might think about what the political consequences of her story should be. But it also made me think of the video I saw of an immigrant mother being reunited with her young son after having been separated by the government for weeks, only to have him reject her embraces and push her aside. Who benefits, really, from the confusion and pain inflicted on him? When children, or those who suffered deep hurts as children, come forward and show us their pain, do we really allow ourselves to hear them, or do we turn aside, or make justifications and excuses — say, “boys will be boys,” or “his mother shouldn't have broken the law”? Do we listen, or do we stop up our ears, lest we hear the painful truth of how we've contributed to their suffering, indirectly if not directly, and confront a choice about our own need to change? Better to drown in the sea, tear apart your body, Jesus says, than to be the cause of stumbling for little ones. If we belong to Christ, if we claim him as Lord above all others, we have to do better.

In my college years, when I was wrestling with some big decision — over a relationship, or a career choice, or one of the other big defining struggles of that season of life, my mother used to quote a rhyming couplet to me. Try as I might, I haven't been able to track down the source, but here's how it goes: “Teach us, O Lord, the art of traveling lightly: / What to love loosely, what to hold tightly.” It's a prayer, but it frames the big choices we make in terms of holding on and letting go. Some things and some people we love, but loosely. We accept the possibility that our journey might carry us away from them. Others are meant to come with us, or we to go with them, a life-changing commitment, like the one Ruth made as she clung doggedly to her mother-in-law Naomi: “where you go I will go.” But because the prayer is about “traveling lightly,” it's understood that these weighty commitments will be few in number, judiciously chosen. There are far more things we need to love loosely than hold tightly.

Cut off your hand, says Jesus, if it keeps you from entering the kingdom. Cut off your foot if it holds you back. Pluck out your eye if it doesn't show you the way. He's teaching us about the baggage we need to throw overboard. Jealousy over sharing our status and privilege — throw it away! Whatever deadens our ears and our hearts to the cries of little ones in need — cut it out! Is your job killing your soul? Leave it. Is there an emotional or spiritual bully in your life who leaves you self-protective and closed off to the graciousness and generosity God intends for you? It's time for some boundaries or distance. Because you can't get to where God is leading you if you're weighed down by these things. Better to enter the kingdom without them than not at all.

This can sound like a hard teaching, and the first disciples heard it that way. Is our walk with Jesus to be seen as a journey involving only sacrifice and self-denial? Is it all about giving up and getting by? If that were true, it would be hard to hear it as good news. But as I started to imagine a gaggle of disciples without hands or eyes staggering into the kingdom, I remembered a story told by a seminary president, Robert Hoch, about two men in China, good friends named Jia Haixia and Jia Wenqi. They work every day at planting a forest in order to stabilize a river bank, to keep their village from flooding. But the remarkable thing about these men is that one of them is a

double-amputee, and the other is blind. They couldn't do their work without one another: "I am his hands; he is my eyes," one of them says of the other. For Hoch, the story of these two men is not one about their disability, but about the gift of their mutual dependence to one another and to their community. He writes:

What if God gives us weakness in order that we might find a better strength, the sacrament of mutual interdependence that makes broken people into whole people, and broken societies into reconciling and healing societies?¹

What if Jesus is calling us to love loosely the things that seem so important—privilege and insulation from our own pain and the pain of others—to let these things go, so that we can hold tightly to our fellow disciples and find grace and strength in one another?

"Have salt among yourselves," Jesus says, addressing not isolated disciples, but a community bound together in the same work and the same hope. The Messiah whose journey will take him to resurrected life only through the cross is inviting us to die to ego and indifference, to die to self-sufficiency and isolation, to favor the outcast and the vulnerable child most of all, to love our very selves loosely, and to hold our neighbor tightly, and, abiding in each another and in him, to rise to everlasting life. May we be Jesus' salty people, today and always! Amen.

1 Robert Hoch, "Yet you shall be different." *Presbyterian Outlook*. 3 Jul 2015. <http://pres-outlook.org/2015/07/yet-you-shall-be-different/>. Accessed 9/30/2018.