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Psalm 124

Mark 9:38-50

WHATEVER

Over the years, it has gotten a bit harder for me to read the small print in a newspaper or on a pill bottle. With what I print out for worship services, I can increase the font size, but if I don't have control over the size of the print, I sometimes need to put on my reading glasses. My eye doctor says I have developed presbyopia. Yes, that is a real vision condition, which is not caused by being a Presbyterian, but is an age-related loss of flexibility in the lens in my eyes. So I occasionally need a little help seeing things clearly. There are other vision problems that Jesus addresses in our gospel text today, and he focuses on them in a way, that definitely doesn't use small print.

Jesus' disciples had observed someone who was helping others find wholeness in the name of Jesus, but they saw him with vision blurred by their sense of offence. They note that the fellow wasn't following them – funny, they were all supposed to be followers of someone else. The account does not indicate whether Jesus was able to keep from rolling his eyes. There seems to be a bit of jealousy among the disciples because they themselves had experienced some difficulty in carrying out a similar form of healing. Jealousy has been called the green-eyed monster and certainly it takes away from the ability to see clearly. It sounds like those original followers of Jesus wanted a monopoly in using the power of the Lord. So they characterize this other guy as an outsider, they look at him askance, and complain about him to Jesus. “You need to protect the franchise, Lord!” But Jesus sees things differently. He doesn't simply ignore their ranting with a comment of, “Oh, whatever.” Instead, in his ministry, he is pleased to welcome allies who carry out works of mercy and justice. And so he tells his followers that those they think of as outsiders must be seen with a spirit not so lacking in generosity. Being harshly judgmental toward those whom we don't even know has the potential to harm all involved. There can be good out there beyond one's core group.

These days, there are many other individuals and groups who are carrying out ministry in the name of Christ. They may have some other strengths and emphases than do we Presbyterians, but if their work leads to healing and wholeness, then we can be thankful to see them as allies addressing a broken world. You'll notice that the story from Mark is not one in which the person who was criticized is preaching hatred or bigotry in the name of Christ – that would require a different response. But Jesus starts out saying there can be good going on beyond you and your own group. Then he is ready to add that there can also be some bad within you and your own group. The disciples aren't inclined to see it that way. So Jesus uses bold headline kind of language, speaking in a big print kind of way to get their attention.

The younger ones among us won't remember the great comedian, Jack Benny, as it has now been over 40 years since his death. He played the role of someone who got to the age of 39 and insisted on going no further, someone who was comically stingy with his money. His timing was impeccable. He could always get laughs with either a pregnant pause or a particular pose. In many of his sketches, his feigned frustration would rise with another character until he would finally utter an exasperated, "Now cut that out!"

The headline language Jesus uses is similar to, "Now cut that out!" He actually goes beyond it in his imagery of amputation. There are harmful things within them and their group, to which they have turned a blind eye. Jesus isn't going for laughs here. Much more than just a cosmetic change is required. He is as serious as losing a hand, foot, or eye. Yet, of course, he is not to be taken literally about physical amputation. He is speaking with hyperbole, to address concerns that can't be ignored.

We Presbyterians focus a lot on God's forgiveness as expressed in and through Jesus Christ. We focus a good bit on God's grace around here. However, that doesn't mean that it works very well for us to do whatever the heck we want and then we simply turn around and ask for divine forgiveness. If we abuse or harm someone in some way, the door to forgiveness from God is not closed, but the person who has been mistreated may be injured externally or internally or both. There are ramifications resulting from our actions. If God protected us from the

harmful effects of our actions, our choices would be meaningless. What we do matters to others. Our actions matter for the future of the church and for the future of the world.

Our actions, of course, also matter for us as well, often in non-physical ways, potentially leaving us spiritually maimed. Jealousy or stinginess can take away the inclination to use a hand to reach out to another – the hand is cut off from God’s intended use. So get rid of whatever it is within you that acts like a hand that wants to wag a finger at those who loving and healing ministry is different from ours. There are plenty of things that can impede our ability to walk forward in our journey of faith – high on the list being a hesitancy to step out trusting God or wanting to stay just where we have been. Whatever it is that wants to kick the door shut on the proclamation of the love and justice of Jesus Christ, we need to get rid of such a foot, so we don’t cut ourselves off from God’s way forward. And, of course, we are called to envision or imagine God’s reign here on earth. If we keep our eyes closed to the possibilities of the abundant living God desires for all, or if a wandering eye keeps focusing on riches, fame, other obsessions, sexual or otherwise, then we truly are a people without vision.

Jesus says, “Submit to spiritual surgery and cut out all that which keeps you from following in my way, that impedes joining fully in my ministry.” The imagery is powerful – whatever gets in the way of our discipleship needs to go! We cannot be complacent about such things. We are called to move from nonchalance that says, “Whatever,” to a passion that roots out **whatever** it is that blocks our faithful response to our Lord. A bit of discernment is called for regarding those beyond our own group, meaning we are to detect and appreciate what God is already doing in and through the other so we can praise God for it in awed humility. We could also use the gift of discernment when we are looking in the mirror. God wants us at our best, which might require a real assessment of heart and spirit to seek to move toward purer priorities as followers of Jesus Christ. Whatever, whatever change is required will be worth it, for there is no higher calling, no higher privilege than to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. I hope even those of us with presbyopia can see that clearly.