

Many paths to Jesus (Mark 9:38-50)

Jesus seems to have an aversion to the kind of us-and-them boundary setting of his disciples.

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September 27, 2024

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I have never been a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher. Having grown up in a theological tradition that used fear as one of its primary evangelistic tools, I long ago grew weary of it.

Frankly, that kind of motivation never felt to me like good news. More like bad news intended to make me run screaming into the arms of Jesus. The destination is one that I welcome and embrace with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I just don't think the journey is necessarily meant to begin in fear.

I think it's better, then, to read the terrifying language Jesus uses in Mark 9 within the context of his entire life and teaching. Which, I believe, means reading Jesus' language as always and forever spoken with all of the love in the world. Which shouldn't be a stretch. Isn't that love what sent Jesus to us in the first place?

The disciples want to copyright their actions on behalf of the gospel. Rather than being glad that there is at least one other person out there fighting the good fight by exorcising demons, they get all possessive. Look closely at the reason for their umbrage. "He was not following us." Not Jesus, us. Oops.

Jesus seems to have an aversion to the kind of us-and-them boundary setting of his disciples. That kind of behavior only serves to limit what is intended to be wide open

and available to all. Getting between someone and their relationship to Jesus is precisely the opposite of what it means to be a disciple. It's causing another to stumble. Telling them they are beyond the reach of God's saving grace. Refusing access to a life and a vocation devoted to Christ. These are the hellish behaviors we'd expect from a Gehenna-dweller. It's not what ought to come from a disciple of Jesus.

I'm sure the disciples' intentions seemed good to them. But if the result of their actions was to turn someone away from Jesus, then their intentions only served to pave the road to Gehenna. They claim to want to join Jesus in his mission of seeking and saving. But they also feel the need to draw lines and write up prerequisites. Yet Jesus keeps on calling them to something more, something less guarded and more free. Jesus insists that they can and should be better than that if they are walking in the way of discipleship.

The path that leads to Jesus is varied. Some are led to Jesus by someone already walking that way. Some stumble into faith by miraculous accident. Some stagger in on their last legs. Some barge in without so much as a knock on the door. And some are awakened one day by a voice from somewhere inviting them to take up their crosses and walk. Each path is a gift of grace from God through Christ Jesus.

It seems to me that Jesus wants to welcome any and all who desire to come to him. Rather than being watchdogs or security guards checking IDs, we are called to join Jesus in celebrating the entrance of everyone who comes. We are called to sacrifice our preferences and any claims we have to keeping things neat and tidy in order to protect the reputation of Jesus and his church. Those preferences may feel as necessary as an eye, an arm, or a leg. Still, Jesus calls us to let them go if they keep us from trusting that his invitation to God's reign is as wide open as he claims it is.

I'll go out on a theological limb and argue that Jesus doesn't need me to have his back or protect his property. I'm pretty sure he has things well in hand.

So let's announce the good news that all are welcome. The doors are open wide. Let's do our best to let nothing get in the way of that welcome. Including ourselves.