

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 26  
The Reverend John Spangler

September 26 and 27, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14  
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

I want to thank you and bring a greeting from your partners in a ministry just down the road in Gettysburg. Thank you for the long, long-standing partnership that you have with the wider expressions of the church, and as a part of that with its theological education ministries, but very specifically I want to bring thanks from President Cooper-White, from the faculty, staff, and students of our school because of the partnership that you play with us in theological education very directly. As you may know, there has been some influence of this seminary, in this ministry along the way. That is even before we get to the long list of interns who have been shaped and formed in parts of your experience along the way. I can't say thank you enough, for that kind of ministry partnership. I pray that continues to thrive for a long, long time to come.

We who gather here in the name of Christ are stitched together by the stories of our faith. We are driven by texts, by little narratives that are sewn together that make up our lives in particular places. Today, I am reminded of the fact that in my first call, a small parish in New England, I ran across because I was doing work for the synod and writing news, even back then, to spread the news among the 200 congregations there, I ran across a young John Brock, who was coordinating the youth work of the synod there and encouraging other people who were working in youth ministry in congregations.

I am talking about such little narratives that reveal about the life of the church and our life together. Two decades later I was following my spouse, who received a call to teach at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and I soon found a place to fit in the work of the staff serving as a kind of crossroads for this church, enough so that I heard pretty quickly about this really dynamic ministry up the road—in Camp Hill. Among those pastoral leaders was a John Brock. Not long after that my daughter went to work for a summer at another camp, named Nawakwa, with a person named Maryanne. New threads are being stitched together all the time, stitching little stories together all the time along our way, along our journey, in Christ.

So little, by little, the Gospel of Mark shows us how the disciples of Jesus were also encountering. Encountering casting out of demons, concern about the “little ones,” or new believers in Christ, about salt, and even about the threatening cost of sin. But this cloth, this stitched together garment, is not a collection of random encounters, or the lucky crossing of paths, or, even willy-nilly antidotes, stories, and people mentioning God.

Rather, Mark is providing us with the fabric of the stories of faith that are anchored to the story of Jesus Christ. Our stories are stitched to the sacred texts that belong to Christ, and not just those that depict his wise teaching. Ultimately the heart of our texts are attached to this overarching narrative of our faith, the suffering and death, and the resurrection, of Jesus Christ. This narrative of the resurrection and Christ at the center of it, convey the fabric, that we call Grace. This is the thing that holds us, the thing that brings strength to the cloth, that is the community. It comes to us because we are a part of the cloth of Christ.

Now along our journeys in faith, it is possible for us to lose our focus, or lose perspective or to say, missed the forest for the trees. Christians are not immune to this very thing, reference the disciples who came across someone casting out demons in Jesus name, but who was not following the twelve. This tendency for disconnection, disenfranchisement, in this case, probably distrust, is deeply embedded in our human experience. It is a part of our human nature. So wide spread, in fact, that it is not just happening among Christians, but it happens among Buddhists. There is a story that circulates widely about a very earnest student who studied the sacred texts of Buddhism and was seeking out his Zen master. He was wanting to know the true meaning of Zen, and the student had spent a long time encountering the sacred text in his tradition, but he had these questions. Who was the best teacher? Who was the most trustworthy? Which sacred writings were the most deeply spiritual and then finally, which monastery, of course, is the most faithful and the best?

He took these questions to his master. Upon hearing these questions, the master took the young man's books and all of his collected study materials, and he tossed them away from him. He took this young man, took him right outside and into the street where he confronted this young man with a poor beggar on the street. He said, "Son, I have two words for you. That is to learn righteousness." I have always believed that our faith, the content of our faith, matters. What we believe matters. Having the teachings well understood, counts. I know that the right teachers can give us the words of faith that enable us to understand more, to see the world in its basic and complex ways. Masters and mentors give us lens to see God at work in the world, and in the lives of our sisters and brothers. These reliable and trustworthy masters open to us the mystery of the texts that are before us. But there comes a time, and a moment, when in our yearning to get it right, to zero in on the best, the most, the most faithful articulation of the faith in pursuit of some unknowable absolute heart of correctness, we can miss the point. It isn't about us, after all. It is possible to have the words, and be missing the music.

At that moment, the next appropriate step of the teacher, is to remind us all of the reason and point of our following in the first place, and to learn the righteousness of God that is to become thankful for God's gracious forgiveness. To love God, to recognize that we are not at the center of the story, but that there is a greater being and a bigger purpose, than any narrow construction of truth, designed to add the pleasure, the imaginary pleasure of God, and to impress our fellow human being. The disciples had come to Jesus, looking to him to help them become more faithful, like their master.

They realized that for Jesus it wasn't good enough to say that it really doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. This kind of thinking reflects a simple shortcut in thinking things through. We know that the content of our faith matters. Jesus didn't say, "Oh, don't worry about it. It really doesn't matter." He said something else. A good work done in his name is to be celebrated. Acts of kindness are to be gratefully received. Even if the words are not exactly right, even if all the credentials are not yet in place, we may rejoice anytime that good work is being done. Whoever is not against us is for us.

Now that he tells the twelve that it is okay to act in His name, Jesus stitches together the story of his disciples, and to this other one who is doing work in his name. Jesus is at work to connect

where there is isolation, where there is agreement in the essentials, where unknowingly persons may disagree about something, but are at work in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus, our teacher, and the reveler of God's will, is the point. He builds the cloth of the people of God in that one little line, in its context, "If you are not against us, you are for us."

In this patchwork of Gospel stories today, forming our third reading, Jesus issues an almost gruesome, if interesting, warning against stumbling blocks to the faith., putting a source of stumbling in front of a seeker, or a new believer. Eyes, or hands, or feet, are never to be causes for stumbling. I have always wondered how much Jesus is exaggerating here, because I know that my own eyes, and probably my hands and feet, have sinned plenty of times. What is He asking of us? What does He expect?

When we follow as disciples, in His name, in the name of Christ, our hands, our eyes, our feet, become His. Remember the prayer that Pastor Easton led at the beginning of our worship time. Praying for our share of the Spirit. Praying for a share of the Spirit to be given to us. This is what this prayer means. Maiming is not the point. Acting in the name of Christ is the point. Healing, helping, ministering, serving, leading, supporting, bearing the cup of water, and sewing seeds of peace are the things that we are called to do the name of Christ. This is the matter at hand, in the big, global questions of hunger and justice. It is also true in the smaller, tangential discussions about human sexuality, about all matters across the life of the church.

That leads us to the mention of salt. God's purpose is never bland. Jesus' teaching is never boring. It is not bland, or tasteless, or invisible, or indiscernible. No, God's mix is vibrant on the tongue, so Jesus asks us to know the one in whose name we serve. Know that it is God, our God, one who speaks a word of grace to us. That salt is like the share of the spirit. It is the animator, the thing that makes it zing, the thing that gives us power in acts of service and ministry. Our hands, our sinful hands, are really no longer our own. Our hands, our heads, our feet, and perhaps our hearts, are none other than the Lords. It is not about us, it is about Christ. Imagine our hands playing the role of the hands of Jesus, that is what it means to have salt in ourselves.

If you believe that your hands, your feet, your whole self, your possessions are those of Jesus Christ, all manners of things may be different. When others act in His name, whom we do not know, all to the good. That is how Jesus built his ministry. Stitching one person to the group. Stitching another group to another individual. That is how Jesus' ministry was being built throughout the Gospel of Mark. The question is will you, and will I, respond to this invitation? To point to Christ, to have salt in ourselves. Amen.