

Condiments

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Mark 9:38-50

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So to recap, every time Jesus teaches the disciples a little more about who he is and what kind of Messiah he is, the disciples recoil. 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and follow me,' to which Peter emphatically responds to Jesus: 'excuse me, but we signed up for the cool skinny jeans Messiah, the one whose charisma captivates the masses and who whispers sweet spiritual one-liners in our ears. We didn't sign up for a crucifixion.' But Jesus quickly rebukes Peter and paints a picture of a very different kind of Messiah, one who will suffer, one who will die, one who will reveal divine power and in the depths of human weakness. Um, that's no fun, the disciples rightly conclude, let's talk instead about which one of us will be remembered as the greatest disciple. After watching some of the Mohammed Ali documentary this week produced by Ken Burns, what comes across so clearly is that part of Ali's greatness was his confidence and belief that he really was the Greatest of All Time. But it is also obvious, by watching, that if being the greatest of all time is your sole goal in life, there is a lot of collateral damage and damage to other human beings left in your wake. Whether the disciples or Ali or any of us, our pursuits of greatness are a whole lot easier to swallow without us having to hear Jesus say that 'whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

Well, this week is not about discipleship or self-denial or greatness; it is about credentials. The disciples see rivals or knock-off disciples casting out demons and healing people in the name of Jesus, but they know that they did not go to a Presbyterian seminary or ever attend a conference at Montreat. They also don't subscribe to the right news agencies and have the wrong bumper stickers on their cars. They are not one of us, the disciples exclaim in protest. We tried to stop them they proudly boast to Jesus. To which once again, Jesus drops the hammer down. 'Do not stop them...for 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.'

So, the Messiah we want is not the Messiah we get, the greatness we want is not really true greatness at all, and being a disciple of Jesus Christ does not elevate us to a level of superiority over anybody else. Oh and on top of all that, isn't it interesting that every time Jesus opens his mouth or teaches the disciples, their next immediate action is even more off and out of line with his teaching that the last time. I am not seeing improvement here, are you? If anything, the disciples seem to be going further astray or are even more off-base that they were previously in trying to understand and make sense of this Messiah and the community he is creating them to be. This is why I think being part of a Christian

community almost functions as the opposite of a self-help book and a self-improvement project. The more we learn, the starker the contrast we see between ourselves and our humanity in Jesus Christ. The more Jesus opens his mouth and we listen to his teaching, the more we come to the realization that we will never be able to will ourselves into the kind of people he has called us to be by ourselves, instead he has stuck us with a bunch of other hapless cases just like ourselves, who have found that perhaps getting better and attaining righteousness on our own is not the goal, but instead that our lives make no sense apart from those we have grown to depend on in shared community, and that we will never be able to credential ourselves into being a Christian, being a disciple, or loving our neighbor. Author Marilynne Robinson, who may also be one of the great public theologians of our time, painfully reminds us that 'however sound our credentials might seem, we have it on good authority that the prostitutes and the sinners might well enter heaven before us.' She continues: 'it is difficult to respond to this assurance with a heartfelt amen if one has found comfort in despising people in whom our [revered] Christ clearly finds great value.'¹

Even if who Jesus is calling the disciples to be goes against the grain of a lot of what they are or at least thought they were, even as they come to realize how short they may fall and how unlikely they are to get their by with their own self-improvement, they are nevertheless enraptured by this Savior even though he challenges so much of what they assumed was the natural order of things. They find that they long ever more deeply to become part of a community whose saltiness enriches and flavors the larger world, even as it upends their own notions of what a Messiah should be, redefines what they thought was greatness, and doesn't require the long resume and list of credentials they believed was all that mattered. And I would venture to say that the same is true for us. Not long ago I had a conversation with someone who is a very earnest and sincere person, but was worried that some of the motives for attending church were mixed or ulterior than what in his view they should be. I replied that there is no wrong reason for attending church and that I don't really care what motive or reason or happenstance gets a person to church. Maybe it is loneliness or desire to see friends. Maybe it is a stern parental expectation. Maybe it is a habit that has been developed over decades and generations. Maybe it is curiosity or desire to learn more and be challenged. Maybe it is the music and the beauty of worship. And maybe it is not always a pretty and pious choice at all, especially if it is raining and dreary or if it is beautiful outside. Whatever the motivation, it doesn't really matter, what matters is what happens to us once we get there. That we have another encounter with this itinerant Rabbi from Nazareth, that his teaching both enraptures and confounds us, that we see our true humanity in Him, and then remarkably receive it from him as a gift of grace, and that we go back into the world, not

¹ Marilynne Robinson, 'Awakening,' in *The Givenness of Things*, 105.

just to enter back into the world of same-ole, same-ole, but to love the world this Savior so loves and to seek the flourishing of the humanity that has been transformed in him. Honestly, a sprinkle of self-improvement and chasing a spiritual narcotic would be easier, but he wants so much more from us and sees so much more in us than a small life spent solely trying to secure our individual spiritual needs.

Theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that Jesus did not come among us to write a book, but to form a community. If he intended his legacy to be a body of teaching, then we would have spent most of his time writing book, but instead, as we see in these interactions with the disciples, as we see in his acts of healing, as we see with his ove of ministry among the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners of this world, Jesus came first and foremost to form a community. Not individual Christians. Not a book. But a Christian community. That is his great legacy. So it is interesting to me that when he talks about this community, we don't hear desired characteristics like 'how to reach perfection,' or 'how to be well regarded and relevant to everyone,' or even a list of characteristics that all followers must adhere to and uphold. Instead, he says that the community must be the salt of the world and have salt in ourselves. Hmm...what does it mean for the church to be a condiment? Not exactly the most glamorous and sexy advertising we could conjure for ourselves I imagine. So what does Jesus mean?

In my first congregation in rural North Carolina, one of the main employers in our community was the Mount Olive Pickle Company, which resided in the big town one town over, in Mount Olive. Every year at the end of April, Mount Olive put on the North Carolina Pickle Festival around the same time as Jazz fest would be happening here, but without the blockbuster crowds and the A-list performers and the same level of festivities, but you did get to sample as many free pickles as your heart desired. At one of the pickle festivals, there was kind of a concluding worship service where different members of the faith community gathered and a worship service was held, but I was never 100 percent sure what a worship service and pickles had to do with each other---I think it was just another way to bring together the community, including the religious community. But at one of those events I remember hearing a representative of the pickle company talk about the importance of the pickle even though it would never be the main thing. You could have a sandwich or a hamburger or barbecue without the pickle, but the pickle was special because it made everything taste better, it made your sandwich go from average to great, it enriched the whole. And I remember hearing that talk and thinking maybe the pickle had more to do with the Christian faith than my cynical mind and sarcastic attitude wanted to give it credit for...As pastor and New Testament scholar Robert Capon reminds us: 'salt seasons and salt preserves, but in any significant quality, it is not of itself edible, nourishing, or pleasant.' So why in the world would Jesus ask us to be salt? Capon thinks it because we are often much more interested in Jesus letting us sell the sugar of moral and spiritual achievement,' than we are the 'salt of Jesus' passion

and death,' and that we much prefer sugary 'salvation for the well-behaved, redemption for the triumphantly correct in doctrine, and pie in the sky for all the winners who think they can walk into the final judgment and flash their passing report cards at Jesus.'² To season and flavor the world as a salty community though, means to serve and proclaim a Savior who 'rejoices over the last, the least, and the little more than all the winners in the world.'³ It means that we will never find fulfillment or purpose in only edifying ourselves and our own religious whims, but instead will only become our true selves, salty if you will, as we exist for the sake of others. Or to put it another way: if all our beautiful prayers, sincere praises, powerful hymns, fantastic programs, and spiritually edifying preaching (okay I'm obviously getting carried away now), lead to the flourishing of even one uncredentialed human being, then we are closer to being the salty community that Jesus proclaims than if we will ever be if faith is just about measuring and pursuing our own personal progress in the Christian life. Of all the things to aspire to be in life, salt seems well, kind of below the mark. But in the hands of Jesus Christ, this community that has salt in itself, thrives not when it exists only for itself and its own needs, but it thrives when it is able to give this world life and flavor for Jesus' sake, until his kingdom comes. Amen.

² Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment*, 'Losing as the Mechanism of Grace,' 183.

³ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment*, 'Losing as the Mechanism of Grace,' 183-184.