

Sermon for Sunday, September 30, 2012 Mark 9:38-50 “You Are Not Special”

Cutting off body parts...what a gospel passage! It sounds so scary – if there is a body part that offends you, that is causing you a problem, just lop it off! Perhaps it shouldn't shock us so much. After all, aren't we constantly bombarded by ads to have a facelift to make us look a little younger, or gastric bypass so we can get skinnier, or liposuction to vacuum out all our nutritional sins? We don't think that kind of cutting off of a part that offends us is all that bad, do we?

We struggle to be the way we think we should be, and how we look is just one aspect of it. I think of a scene in that novel, “I Don't Know How She Does It,” about an overworked young mother, Kate Reddy, in a high-powered job. She realizes late one evening she is committed to bring a pie to her child's class the next day. She just doesn't have the time to whip one up, so she runs out and picks one up at the store. But it looks too, well, store-bought, too perfect. So Kate squishes it a bit around the edges, so it looks a little more home-made. Because heaven forbid any of the other moms would think that this woman didn't make the pie with her own two hands for her precious child's school! We laugh at this image, but we know that Kate is not alone. We care about how we appear to others. We want to belong. We want to be approved of by those around us. And sometimes we allow the silliest things, like a pie for a school bake sale, to make us a little crazy in our desire to be seen as a fine, normal, upstanding member of our community.

And in that desire, we do things that get in the way of being authentic, honest, ourselves. We squish the edges of the pie. We get a little nip and tuck from the plastic surgeon. We pad our resumes. We worry that we're not good enough, so we do odd things that we think will make us look better. In a commencement speech last year, the author David McCullough named this very pointedly: *“In our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another—which springs, I think, from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality — we have of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement. We have come to see them as the point — and we're happy to compromise standards, or ignore reality, if we suspect that's the quickest way, or only way, to have something to put on the mantelpiece, something to pose with, crow about, something with which to leverage ourselves into a better spot on the social totem pole.”*

McCullough may have named this as a 21st century phenomenon, but Jesus' disciples were just as likely to fall into this trap as you and I are. Remember last week? In the midst of Jesus telling them the most important part of his story, that he was going to be killed by the authorities but would rise again from the dead, what were they doing? Arguing. About what? About who is more important. Completely missing the point, of course. Thinking about the wrong thing, about who appears to have the most power and favor.

And Jesus loses patience with them, as he is continuing to lose patience with them in today's passage. They have come to him, complaining about somebody who is trying to do what they are supposed to do – to cast out demons. Like petulant six year olds, they say, “Jesus, Jesus! There's a guy who's not one of us, not one of your chosen disciples, and he's casting out demons. We tried to make him stop, but he wouldn't. Make him stop! Make him stop!”

In other words, we thought we were the special ones who get to do this. Nobody else should get to cast out demons but us, because we're special and he's not. And the subtext is, if this guy who isn't one of the special disciples does this, then maybe we're not so special anymore.

And that's the sort of thing we worry about, isn't it? What makes us special. What makes us appreciated by others. What sets us apart and makes us appear to be something more than everybody

else, whether it's looking like a 30 year old when you're sixty, or like a highly educated person when you barely finished college, or like a successful businessperson when your business is always teetering on the brink of failure.

And Jesus once again is faced with the task of explaining to these sometimes frustrating disciples that the thing that they strive for – who is the greatest, who is the one who does the best job of casting out demons – is the wrong thing. The thing that they strive for – being better than the other guy – misses the whole point of Jesus' teachings. Elsewhere in his commencement address, McCullough shocks the graduates by telling them "you are not special". Jesus says the same thing. "You are not special. You are not the only one who can do these things. You will trip yourselves up in a thousand ways, and you will find others who appear to be better at casting out demons that you are....and it doesn't matter. Only loving me and doing the work matters, and anyone who wants to do the work in my name is invited to the party. You need to let go of your need for ego gratification and your worry about what others think of you, and just do the work, and welcome others into the work as well."

Jesus tells them, "You are going to find things about yourselves that get in the way of doing this – you need to do an attitude adjustment to divest yourselves of those things, not because it will make you look better, but because it will make you BE better. And in being better, you will find it easier to share the burden of the work I lay before you. It will not be all about you."

What gets in the way when we try to follow Jesus? Isn't it often our own expectations of what Jesus wants us to be? We are works in progress – and I stress the word "work".

When we think of our relationship with Jesus, I suspect we are quick to be nervous. We make up our lists of all of our imperfections and wonder if, when Jesus looks at us, he sees the messed up piles of confusion that we see in ourselves. But I believe that he sees more than that. He sees our possibilities, as he saw the possibilities in the twelve he chose to be his first disciples. He sees how special we might become, even with our messy human imperfections. He sees his love shining through us in a thousand different ways, and that light makes our dark moments just a shadow.

The things that we need to work on are not how we appear to the world – which of us is richer or more important or prettier – but what we do in the world, how we invite others to join us in the work of making the world a better place, a place that is what Jesus envisions for all of us. We cannot do it alone. We shouldn't pick and choose who does it with us. And I expect that when we're done, we, like the world, will look a whole lot better, to us and to Jesus.

Amen.