

“Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” (26Sept21)
Mark 9:38-50; Numbers 11

One of my favorite learnings of the past decade or so goes like this: be careful about drawing dividing lines for who is closer to Jesus, because wherever you draw them, he’ll be on the other side.

If you’re participating in this worship service, there’s a decent chance you count as an insider to church. We should be cautious feeling that about ourselves, though.

Or maybe you still feel like an outsider not fitting in, for not believing the right things or having doubts, or that you might not be good enough or are just busy with other things, or maybe you don’t feel very well cared for by God. But if you feel like an outsider, these readings today may affirm that that’s an okay place to be and the Spirit is still working in and through you.

Following a pattern in the Gospel of Mark—for example how we heard an “Ephphatha” healing of a speaking-impaired man result in other impure foreigners readily receiving and proclaiming the good news even though the disciples won’t do it—again in this reading, we have outsiders doing the insider work and insiders who might need to be cut off.

It’s no surprise that John the disciple complains about an outsider casting out demons in the name of Jesus because earlier in the chapter the disciples themselves were unable to do that. In the verses just before this, they nevertheless kept arguing with each other about who was the greatest.

And even though in the very verse before this Jesus said all you have to do is welcome a little child in his name, still these disciples want to do more impressive things, like casting out demons. You could see where it would be irritating when they want credit for doing superpower fancy spiritual stuff only to have somebody else get to do it.

It’s also noteworthy that John doesn’t phrase this other demon-caster as not following *Jesus*; John says following “us.” It could be an innocuous insider pronoun, or it could again be wanting to be

in charge and get attention, to be the greatest by being a leader, not by being a servant.

Meanwhile, John and the others wanted to stop the one who *was* serving, who was doing good, helping others.

We should notice that God’s good and caring work isn’t restricted to inside the church. That’s one main focus of the Awaken Dane program that kicked off yesterday. It will be exciting to discover how our eyes and our hearts become trained to see the Spirit active around us—and sometimes in spite of us.

So I am grateful for the good we do—the hospitals and schools and food pantries the Lutheran church has set up through the years, for the racial justice programming and disaster relief and advocacy efforts we’re part of. But God is doing a lot more of that good outside the church, including through supposedly secular society, of healing, teaching, feeding, helping, saving, providing, caring.

We shouldn’t be worried about getting the credit, and certainly shouldn’t insist the work needs to be done by us, as our responsibility. Maybe our part is to reverse John’s reaction. Instead of restricting it as our role while resenting the good others are doing, we could celebrate what God is doing out ahead of us.

That’s Moses’ response in our first reading. 70 elders were supposed to receive a share of the Spirit, but two of them—Eldad and Medad—didn’t bother to show up for the special ceremony where the Spirit was going to be handed out. But it turns out that the Dad boys—El and Me—still got the Spirit and were doing stuff anyway. Does it seem fair that they could skip church and still get the benefits? I might have reason to complain, but Moses rightly says, “It’d be great if everybody had the Spirit!”

To go a step further on this, Jesus points out that not only shouldn’t we presume we’re the only do-gooders for others, but also just as much we have good done to us. When you’d get stuck on what more special spiritual stuff you could be doing, Jesus flips it to say that even somebody who

gives you a drink has done an extremely important thing.

Good ol' Ched Myers describes it this way: the disciples are "worried about those with competing power, but Jesus is welcoming *all* those who do the works of mercy and justice. John is entertaining 'holier than thou' delusions, but Jesus points out how his followers will often find themselves on the *receiving end* of compassion."^{*}

Again, it portrays that we shouldn't be trying to draw lines that say we have unique jurisdiction for being closer to God's work.

The next part of the Gospel reading sounds much more brutal. It would be preferable for you to be drowned under a millstone rather than to scandalize or trip up a little follower of Jesus. And then a catalog of amputations, dismemberment, and disgorgement. Cut off your hand, your foot, pluck out your eye. A "head, shoulders, knees, and toes" of scandalous, hellish body parts.

The infamous self-castration story of an early theologian notwithstanding, it's probably worthwhile to hear these not as your own body parts, but more like our corporate body, the body of Christ. Where Jesus before was including an outsider—saying don't forbid someone from serving and doing good works—here is the reverse: if somebody claims to be an insider but is causing harm, get rid of them.

That could be a helpful distinction, versus taking this as a blueprint from Jesus that if one of your body parts sins then you'll go to hell. Jesus may be depicting the high value of this community and how we treat each other. Do we take it with this level of seriousness to fit language of unquenchable fire and deathless worms? Of severity that says hurting each other is worth expulsion? It's a very different question than dreading eternal punishment.

But I'm not sure that makes it a whole lot easier. I'd have to wonder if I should be kicked out and cut off. Have I caused our little ones to stumble? Have I done any harm and failed in what I should be doing for you? You can most certainly bet on it, so maybe you should get rid of me.

And yet Jesus keeps including the outsiders, bringing even us back in. The disciples will go on to fail by betraying, denying, and abandoning Jesus himself. He will be the one cut off—and not just an eye or a hand, but head, shoulders, knees, and toes and life itself. Killed outside of town and outside the law, this is Jesus always stepping across the boundary lines, always reaching out to those excluded and left out, to bring you back to him with new life.

It's how God works, never tightening the circle but opening the embrace. This was also in our first reading, where everyone was complaining and whining. Moses was kvetching about the people. The people were grumbling about missing the farmers' market back when they were slaves, grouching that they wanted meat. Even innocent young Caleb was griping. But God will keep taking them back, forgiving, trying to satisfy them, abiding with them and leading them endlessly onward through the wilderness.

For our part, we can trust this God. We can keep our eyes open for how this God is active doing good works in the world around us, and even caring for us. We can receive the cups of cold water with gratitude, knowing God is behind even the smallest good we receive.

Further, we could stop drawing divisive and restrictive lines. We could try to quit complaining. We could see the importance of each other.

That may be in Jesus' peculiar final words about salt. Many understand that reference to salt being a sign of covenant relationship, being bound together. It might refer to table fellowship, sort of like our notion of breaking bread with each other. We share a common sustenance. Just as God won't give up on you, Jesus tells us to take these relationships seriously and be at peace with each other.

So even though we can't much exchange or share the peace in this format, still I'll offer you the greeting and blessing: the peace of Christ be with you always.

^{*} *Binding the Strong Man*, p262. Italics in original.