

A sermon preached on September 26th, 2021 based upon Mark 9:38 – 48 entitled, “Learning the Jesus Walk”.

The passages we’ve been hearing from Mark’s Gospel come from a distinct section that starts with Jesus first telling his disciples he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die and be raised up, and concludes with his entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of Holy Week.

A journey is taking place, and as we hear the story of this journey, we are invited to make the trip with Jesus as well, attempting to get a feel for what I would call “the Jesus walk.” Doing the Jesus walk didn’t come easily for the disciples, nor does it come easily for you or me, because it involves submitting to a kind of death, and who likes that idea?

The Jesus walk invites us to put to death that anxious, clutching ego with its cramped little life and allow a much more expansive and ultimately joyful life to arise.

The problem is, we mistakenly identify *with* our clutching little egos, thinking that’s who we really *are*, but that’s actually a lie we learn early on. Deeper down inside us there is this sacred mystery we call the “soul” – and for the soul to arise within us, the ego has to die.

In the passage just before this morning’s reading, Jesus tells his disciples for the second of three times that he must suffer and be killed, and on the third day be raised, but Mark tells us the disciples have no idea what he’s talking about and are afraid to ask him to explain.

You know how it is with us humans: when anxiety gets a hold of us, well it can bring out our petty side – those cravings of our ego for some kind of assurance that our lives matter because we’re better, smarter, or whatever than other people.

Mark tells us that the disciples start arguing among themselves about which of them is most worthy, the most “right”, the most whatever – an indication that their anxiety has driven them more deeply into that narrow, suffocating little ego life. When Jesus asks them what they’ve been arguing about, they’re too embarrassed to answer because immediately they recognize their own pettiness.

Jesus takes the opportunity for what he hopes can be a teaching moment. He gently takes a little child – somebody in that culture who has no social status whatsoever – and invites the child stand in the midst of the disciples. He tells them that if they want to be great, seek out the rung on the status ladder that belongs to this little kid.

Greatness comes, Jesus says from losing your little ego that always wants to put itself first and instead becoming a servant of all and instead becoming a servant of all – seeing everybody you meet as somebody who –just like you – truly matters and is worthy of love and respect.

But as Mark proceeds to tell the story, it becomes clear that the disciples have totally missed the lesson. They're just not getting the "Jesus walk".

Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Did you catch that? John is upset because he and the others disciples met this guy somewhere – some free agent out there doing his best imitation of the Jesus walk – doing good stuff – casting out demons. (*I'll get to what casting out a demon means in a little bit*).

It doesn't seem to matter to John that this guy has been doing good stuff in the world – he's ticked off that the guy wasn't following them – doing things *their* way. John and presumably the other disciples are irritated that this guy doesn't get it that obviously there's a pecking order in the Jesus movement, and since they are actual real live disciples of Jesus, this guy should be deferring to them and their superior authority. And there in a nut shell is one of the things that most grieves Jesus' heart – the long history of the church's splitting apart over petty arguments regarding what you're supposed to believe and about who claims to hold the authority -- about which group has done a better job with their creeds and dogmas in their misguided attempt at nailing down the great mystery that is Jesus.

I mentioned last week that when you listen to the New Testament it is a little like listening into a family argument. It's okay to disagree over beliefs. Arguments can be constructive.

But here's what we need to remember: What matters isn't getting everybody in line regarding beliefs, or having everybody worship the same way. What matters is this: whether we're seriously trying to learn how to do the "Jesus walk".

There's a reason "Christians" like to argue over beliefs – it can seem a whole lot easier than actually *doing* the Jesus walk.

What we believe matters only so far as it supports us in doing the Jesus walk.

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

So, this free agent Jesus follower has been doing “deeds of power” – what the disciples earlier referred to as “casting out demons” – something Jesus is described doing several times in the Gospel.

How are we to understand this whole “*casting out demons*” thing?

Well, one thing that is clear is that there is a struggle going on between good and evil in this world. What is also clear but unfortunately too often is missed is that the frontline of this struggle isn’t so much “out there” as it’s “in here” in the hearts and mind of each one of us.

It’s a day by day struggle between – on the one side – fully embracing life in all its wonder and miracle, and on the other – the desire to close down and give up and live a very small life, devoid of wonder.

It’s a struggle between living our lives with ego-sacrificing love, or to live with bitterness and hate.

It’s between living our lives with courage – trusting God to see us through the scary times -- or to let our fears rule our lives.

It’s between living honestly, authentically, or living deceitfully, fraudulently.
It’s between finding our inherent, sacred worth in God’s love for us, or allowing other people be in charge of our worthiness.

It’s between living humbly and gently in this world, or living pridefully and arrogantly.

It’s between seeing with the eyes of Jesus, recognizing everybody we meet as beloved by God, or claiming the authority that is not rightfully ours to judge some people worthy and others not – seeing people as objects and stereotypes rather than holy, sacred mysteries.

Every day we are presented with choices to make – some big – most of them small – between good and evil – between light and darkness – and frankly, sometimes the pull of the dark side becomes simply too strong to resist.

We find ourselves compelled to make choices that diminish life.

And when that happens, well, that’s what the New Testament is referring to when it talks about “demonic spirits.”

Because Jesus' ego died in the waters of John's baptism, he lived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and so whenever people who recognized they needed help to be set free from these demonic forces came in contact with Jesus – well, the balance of power shifted dramatically inside them.

The light grew stronger and the darkness grew weaker.

The life force got sturdier and more expansive.

The thing we miss about the story of Jesus' death and the resurrection is that it expresses a pattern of living that is the essence of the "Jesus walk" – an ongoing process of death and resurrection in our own lives in which the ego repeatedly undergoes a kind of death – and resurrection occurs as we experience anew

that our lives are bathed in grace – that the mystery Jesus referred to as the "Kingdom of God" is right here, right now in the midst of all the brokenness of this world.

And Jesus said that when we begin to learn to walk the way he walks – when we begin to live out the ongoing mystery that is death and resurrection – we become channels of God's grace and peace for others. We become the sort of people who can help cast out demons in others – that is, help shift that balance of power from darkness to light.

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.

Which is to say, sometimes it can be very small deeds – as simple as the offer of a drink of water – to bring about this shift in the balance of power from death to life in another person.

There's this story that has made the rounds – perhaps you've heard it. As I recall, it's about a high school student – a freshman we'll call "Mark". Mark is heading home on the bus from school one afternoon early in the year with an unusually large number of books in an overly stuffed backpack. Getting off the bus, Mark stumbles under the weight he's carrying and the books come pouring out of his backpack – all over the sidewalk.

Embarrassed, Mark sits down and begins to repack his backpack. Some kids smirk, but one boy Mark hadn't met – we'll call him "Jack" – gets off the bus and seeing Mark's predicament – kneels down beside him, offering a hand in carrying his excessive load of books. They walk along together, making small talk about the start of school. Mark and Jack become friends – not besties, but friends nonetheless.

A couple of years pass and it's time to graduate. As I recall the story, the boy we've called Mark writes a letter to Jack. In the letter, Mark recalls the day they met, telling him that something like a miracle had taken place that day, and he thought Jack deserves to know

about this miracle. Jack probably wouldn't remember Mark wrote but, the day they met had been a Friday. The first few weeks of high school had gone so badly that Mark had felt so extraordinarily lonely and depressed and his life so full of darkness that Mark had made the very clear decision that over the course of the weekend he would take his life and end his suffering.

Mark had it all figured out. He didn't want his parents to have to come down to the school afterwards to clear out his locker. That's why Mark had been carrying so many books home that day.

And then with the simple kindness of Jack's offer to help him carry his books, and his willingness to walk beside him as they made their way home – well, it caused a beam of light to break into the deep darkness Mark had been experiencing. It was enough light to shift the balance – enough light to lead him to cancel his plans to bring his life to an end.

Over time, the light had steadily grown stronger for Mark. Now as he approached graduation Mark was so very grateful to be alive. And he wouldn't be, if not for the simple kindness Jack had shown him that day. He thought Jack should know the miracle his kindness had brought about.

So, there are moments in life when some small act done out of love can shift the balance of power in a person from darkness to light.

But as Jesus continues to speak, he points out that the opposite is also true. Sometimes little acts of thoughtlessness and cruelty can throw the balance of power in the opposite direction in a person's life.

In what follows in our scripture reading, Jesus refers to the "little ones", and when he does, he's actually talking about all of us. We are "little ones" because apart from the power of God, we are actually – all of us -- quite fragile.

Right now, we may be feeling quite sturdy, and if that's the case, that's great.

But the proper response to finding yourself in such a state should be not so much pride as gratitude. That's what the "Jesus walk" evokes: gratitude.

The truth is that for each of us all it would take – to borrow the title of a series of children's books – is just *a series of unfortunate events* to bring us to the edge of the abyss. One little cruel word could be the last of a series of unfortunate events that push a person over the edge.

As Jesus proceeds to talk about our impact on the “little ones” – that is, on one another – he proceeds to talk in a way that doesn’t sound like what we’re accustomed to hear coming out of the mouth of Jesus.

He goes kind of ballistic. He uses what’s called “hyperbole” – which means he exaggerates to make a point. As you listen to this last section, I invite you to imagine Jesus grabbing you by the lapels, looking you straight in the eyes, as if to say, *“Listen to me – don’t blitz out on me here! What I’m talking about is really, really important.”*

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

There are preachers who latch onto these words and taking them literally, place them at the center of their preaching: *“The eternal fires of hell await you if you don’t give your life to Jesus.”* And frankly, I think such preaching is an abomination. I think Jesus should sue such preachers for defamation of character.

Jesus revealed a God who never gives up on a person, never stops searching for – as the parables tell us – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost child. Jesus makes his appeal to us out of his great, great love and not through threats of eternal damnation.

But in rejecting a literal interpretation of these words, there is the grave danger we’ll miss the larger point. Our spiritual lives really do matter. The choices we make day by day matter. We can choose to love money and status markers, we can choose to love our resentments and our “need to be right” and win arguments, *or* we can choose to love God and people.

When we make a habit choosing to focus our attention on the wrong things, eventually we become slaves to the choices we have made. We really do have souls and souls can get lost because we get distracted by what the world tells us to focus on. And when that happens, our lives themselves become hell.

We really are connected at the very deepest level. We impact the people around us for good or for evil more than we know.

So, keep trying to learn the Jesus walk. Know that you're sure to stumble and fall time and again – just keep getting back up to try again, because the Jesus walk

really is the only way to live a life that truly matters. And hopefully in some of those stumblings you'll receive the great blessing of having somebody come along side you to give you the hand you need to help you get back up.

And this I know for sure: if you keep your eyes and your hearts open, you'll be given innumerable opportunities to be that someone who comes along when another stumbles and falls.