

***When It Hurts to Share***  
By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone  
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Mark 9:38-50  
*“Whoever is not against us is for us.”*

*Prelude – The Grotesque Passage*

This passage makes us nervous. It is a difficult, scary and at times overwhelming passage. When we read through the passage we often get stuck on Jesus’ words about cutting off our own hand, foot, or eye, fire and flame of hell and millstones around our necks. Maybe you have found yourself reading through this passage and scratching your head, wondering what it might mean. Are we to truly cut off our hand or foot if it causes us to stumble? How extreme do we need to be? Will heaven be full of people with one hand, one foot, or one eye? How are we to understand this passage?

I think a common reaction to Mark 9:38-40 is to avoid it. This past week I was at a clergy conference. While sitting around a table, in-between meetings, the topic of Sunday’s sermon arose. Each person said which text he or she would be preaching and why, and more often than not, my colleagues were avoiding this text, because it was too complex, too bizarre and too difficult to tackle. We run past this passage like it was a sore point in the Gospel. It makes us nervous and uneasy in our faith and in our understanding of Christ. I remember when I was moving to Dayton, Ohio, we were given a tour of the neighborhood so we could find a place to live. The church hired a woman to show us around and to help us get acclimated. She brought us to all of the bright, pretty and well-manicured neighborhoods. She told us about the excellent schools, the top-notch services and the multitude of opportunities that could be found in those neighborhoods. Near the end of the day, we looked at a map of where we have been, and I pointed to one neighborhood that was fairly close to the church and asked why we hadn’t been there yet. She lowered her voice and looked right at me, “you wouldn’t want to live there, because it is not a very safe neighborhood.”

I wonder if we act the same way about this text as well as others. I wonder if we were giving someone a tour of the Gospels if we would tell people to skip over this passage, because it is not safe or easy to understand. After all, we don’t want to be seen as a people who advocate maiming and self-mutilation. It is a passage that makes us nervous.

Yet even as we avoid the passage, and as our glance is pulled toward the seemingly grotesque, we miss the part of the passage that is truly challenging. We coast by the passage like we coast by an accident on the highway. Our necks pull like rubber as we look at the mass of mangled words suggesting the unthinkable, but we miss the tree that caused the accident in the first place. So let’s go back, and walk through this passage and maybe find out what it is that drove Jesus to offer such harsh and demanding words.. Let’s find ourselves walking with the disciples and walking with Jesus.

*Movement 1 – Wearing the Same Clothes*

Imagine that you are walking with Jesus. Imagine that you are in this elite group of Jesus’ close friends. You have been given power and authority because of your closeness to Jesus, and you have been seen by the town, village, or countryside as someone chosen and blessed by Jesus. At time people come to you looking for the same or similar wisdom and healings that they receive from Jesus; it is as if you are an emissary of Jesus’ good news.

Imagine that there is a moment when you have to go to town for some food and other errands. As you walk through the market place, you notice how people are looking at you, and are treating you. You recognize how people are talking about you in hushed and awe-filled tones, and it feels good. On the way back to Jesus and the disciples, you hear someone yelling and shouting and making a commotion just outside the marketplace. There is a crowd gathered around the person causing the commotion, but you manage to push your way through to the front of the crowd. There, in the front of the crowd is someone preaching, holding the hand of another person, and praying over her. Just another eccentric who thinks he can do something powerful, who thinks that he can cast out demons. Yet just as you are leaving, you hear him call upon Jesus' name as he casts out the demon, and you stop in your tracks. This man has not been walking with you and the others. This man has not been following Jesus, he had not been with your elite group, and was not a part of Jesus' movement and yet he dares to presume to invoke Jesus' name! Shocked and surprised and offended, you jump in-between him and the woman, trying to stop him from claiming to be a part of Jesus movement. This man has no right and no place claiming to be like you and claiming Jesus' name for acts of power. He had not walked through the towns with Jesus, he had not endured the storms with Jesus, he was not a part of Jesus' inner circle, and had no place claiming to be a follower of Jesus. So you try to stop him, you try to put him in his place. You later find Jesus and tell him about this charlatan, you tell him how you tried to stop this copycat. To your surprise, Jesus scolds you, tells you that you should not have tried to stop the man, and that you were wrong. Jesus says that even though this man was not a part of the insider group, he could still share in the ministry of Christ only because he was not against the group.

This was hard to hear, it was hard for the disciples to accept that they were expected to share the power, the message, the responsibilities and the prestige that come with following Christ. Like children with their toys, the disciples did not want to share Jesus with others. They might lose their own sense of being unique. They might lose their own sense of being needed and importance in the community. They might lose their sense of power and prestige if just anyone could also claim to be a part of Jesus' ministry. They did not want to share this ministry. They did not want to open the doors of Christ's grace to an outsider, and yet Christ exhorts them to do so. Here is what I think is the crux and the difficulty of the passage. Here is the challenge of the passage that makes us all nervous, because Christ is asking the disciples and us to share.

### *Movement 2 – When Churches and Christians Wear the Same Dress*

I think this is the part of the passage that we want to overlook more than any other part. It is a part of scripture that is harder for us to hear than the passages about maiming and mutilation, because as Christians and as churches, we often want to be unique. As Christians and as churches, we often want to be the one in the community that is the beacon of the cross of Christ. We want to be the one with the gospel message. We don't like to share the limelight. We don't like to share the fame, and we don't like to share Christ.

Really, it isn't just with Christ but with almost all aspects of our lives. We have a hard time sharing. If we spend a lot of time and energy fixing up our front lawn, with our own hands, with our sweat, earning calluses and gaining backbreaking work, we can feel proud of our work. Yet if our neighbor goes and does the same quality job by hiring a crew, and expects us to share the neighborhood pride of a well-manicured lawn, do we not feel a little resentful? Do we not feel as if our neighbor does not deserve a lawn that looks just as good as or better than the lawn we worked over and produced? That was partly what was disturbing the disciples. They had

walked with Christ. They had struggled with Christ, and here this no-name is claiming to be a follower of Christ without spending one day in the inner circle? So maybe it is a pride thing. And maybe we can relate.

When we work hard to start a specific ministry like the clothing drive, we take pride in the items we collect. We are proud of our ministry, the work we have done and the impact we have on the greater community. Yet imagine if a church three times our size decides to also have a clothing drive. They have greater resources, they have more people, and their clothing drive is a huge success. But they use the same program we use. Wouldn't we feel a little jealous? Wouldn't we say we did all the work to get the momentum started, and feel like that other church should find something else to do?

I have heard of one church in the city that wanted to start an AIDS ministry. They saw a need and wanted to meet the need. And just down the street, was another church that was also starting an AIDS ministry. So the one minister asked the other minister if they would like to collaborate their resources. He received a sound and sure answer – no! One minister would not work with the other minister. For some reason we are afraid of sharing our ministries and our resources. For some reasons we hesitate from cooperating with other churches and Christians. We have a large gathering of Baptist churches in many neighborhoods, practically on top of each other, but because we can't take a risk and share ministries with each other they are all struggling on their own. I have Methodist friends who are serving three and four small rural churches which can't seem to agree on the idea of working together. In the early 1600s, Baptists and Quakers competed over bringing people to Christ. They saw each other in direct competition with each other and did not want to share the grace of Christ.

And while it may not happen in this church, I can imagine that in other churches individuals want to hold onto their ministry. Sister Ann teaches Sunday school, because that is her thing, and we don't want to take it away, and she doesn't want to share. Brother Paul takes care of the bills because that is his ministry, and we don't want to take that away, and he doesn't want to share. It may not happen in this church, but I know of other churches where members would complain of doing all of the work, but not willing to share when help is offered. And if someone would start something similar, then a competition would begin.

Maybe you heard of churches that began to have younger people start joining and working in the church, and the older guard becoming agitated because these young upstarts are taking and doing the ministry that they have been doing fine all along. There is a reluctance to share. It then becomes bullies arguing over who would terrorize the playground, parents arguing over who would take care of the children.

I can see, and I can imagine that we could very easily relate with the disciples and their anxiety over an outsider claiming the ministry that they had worked hard to own and live.

### *Movement 3 – If No One Shares, No One Plays*

Yet when we argue, when we fail to share, and we will all fall as we attempt to do the work of the Lord. Imagine that parents are arguing over who can take care of the children. Maybe they are divorced, maybe they aren't but they are arguing over who will cook dinner, who will take the kids to practice, and who will read to the children. Imagine the parents fighting and notice that off in the corner are the children starving for someone to offer a hand, a hug, and help in growing and becoming the children of God that they are called to become. They are starving for some attention, because all of the energy that the parents have is spent in their arguments

rather than in their care. I use this as an example, but in reality, it happens, parents fight, refuse to share, and the children suffer. In the same way Christians and churches fight.

Imagine two churches surrounded by a needy homeless population, and fighting over ministry. Maybe one of the churches already has a viable soup kitchen which offers some needed care to the people around them. The other church wants to start its own ministry to the homeless, but the first church gets nervous, and it sends a nice committee over to the second church asking them in all manner of speaking to cease and desist. Maybe they start by nicely suggesting that it would be better to focus on a prison ministry. Maybe they continue by reminding them that the homeless already know about their ministry and would be confused with a second ministry. Then maybe they would leave angry and anonymous phone calls. And then maybe do anything possible to keep any and all funding to reach that church. And then call the State inspectors to shut the church's ministry down. These actions are not spiritual, they are not Christian, and the energy spent from one church trying to shut down another church could have been focused on the ministry to the homeless.

Our egos take over our pride and take us away from our ministry. Our shouting distracts our sharing, and our resources are depleted by trying to protect our own fiefdoms. Remember the disciples trying to stop the other person from using Jesus' name. Maybe a fistfight broke out, and that would not be a good witness. Maybe the disciples were then seen as arrogant, and that would not be a good witness. All of the work, all of the outreach that Jesus made could have easily been torn down by the arrogant and closed doors of the disciples. They didn't want to share the gift, the grace, and the relationship with Christ, and in not sharing, so much could have been lost.

Maybe that is why Christ was so adamant about inclusion that he offered the metaphor about the millstone and the neck. When Christians argue and fight all suffer and none are served. Maybe that is why Christ responded in such a harsh way. After all, it was only a few verses earlier that the disciples tried to keep the children from Christ. After all, the disciples questioned when Christ shared with a woman at the well, when Christ reached out to the gentiles, the outcaste and the undesirable. Again and again the disciples balked at the idea of opening the circle of followers wider and wider, and each time Christ responded with harshness.

It is so simple, that you think the disciples would get it and that we would get it. When no one shares, then no one plays. If someone has a baseball bat, and someone has a glove, and someone has a ball, but no one shares, then no one will play ball. If one church has a kitchen, and one church has some cooks, but neither gets together for the sake of ministry, then no ministry will be achieved. If you have some gifts, but keep them to yourself, then Christ's work will not be done. Yet so often we hold back from sharing and working together because of a difference in theology, a difference in values and vision, and what happens is that our voices will become hoarse from shouting, our hands empty and nothing will be done.

I recently heard a story of an Islamic doctor in upstate NY who came down with a sudden case of appendicitis. He needed an operation, but it was a rural part of NY, a town where there were not too many doctors. The only doctor that could operate on him was Jewish, and the two did not get along in the past. They could have been stubborn, they could have refused to operate and to be operated upon. What needed to happen was for the Muslim doctor needed to share his own vulnerability, and the Jewish doctor needed to share his talents and humility. Both needed to accept each other, and to share.

If we do not share our talents, if we do not share our grace, if we do not share our love and if we do not share our faith, then we will not be true to Christ and all will fall.

#### *Movement 4 – The Salt of Sharing*

What we need to remember is the challenge Christ gives to us. We are challenged to be salt. We are challenged to have flavor, to have fire, and to have a passion. And where does that salt come from? From where do we find our fire and our passion and our flavor for life? From the knowledge that we are redeemed, from the hope that we have been given life, and from the grace that we are loved we gain our salt. When we walk with Christ, we see how he loves us, we feel his loving touch, we experience him sending the demons out of us, we are made whole by his presence, and from then on, our life has flavor.

When we remember that even though we have fallen, we are still loved, then we have salt.

When we realize that there is a place for each and every one of us in the family of God we have salt.

When we realize that God created each one of us special and loves us very much we have salt.

When we look to the cross we find our salt, because we know that we have life, we have salvation, and we have been redeemed. We have salt because the gifts we have gained from Christ are so great and so wonderful that we cannot keep them to ourselves; we want to tell the world. We have salt because the love of God through Christ showers down upon us, fills us, and makes us overflow so that we have to share it with others. We have salt because we look at our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and our friends and realize that they are also children of God, loved by God, and held near and dear to God's heart, and we are compelled to hold them near and dear as well.

This salt is our passion, it is our desire and it is the fire that brings us here and the passion that moves us closer to Christ. This salt convicts us to share, to help and to serve. It is our flavor and our fire. Remember the source of your salt, stay true to story and that passion, and hold onto the flavor of Christ which is your salt.

In the movie *Braveheart*, the main character, William Wallace, had a passion for the freedom of the people of Scotland. That passion for freedom was his salt, it drove him in his life. There was one scene when he was offered land and title by the English as a bribe so that he would stop his push toward freedom. But Wallace held onto his salt, his passion for freedom and turned away from the gifts and bribes. His salt drove him throughout the movie.

In a similar way, we are to hold onto our salt, we are to remember our salt and keep that in our focus. Remember your salt, your passion and your purpose with your life with Christ.

#### *Movement 5 – The Maiming Passion of the Salt*

Remember your salt, and let that reaffirm your passion for that ministry. Hold onto that passion with such a level of intensity that you understand the passage about the maiming and the cutting of limbs. Let your passion for Christ be so strong that you will let nothing get in the way.

Let me ask you, is your passion for Christ, is your salt for Christ so powerful that you would be willing to give up anything for the sake of the gospel? Is your passion to spread God's love so strong that you would be willing to let go of anything for the sake of the gospel? Would you be willing to swallow your pride and let someone else take part in your ministry? Would you be willing to lose your position of power for the sake gospel of Christ? What would you loose for Christ?

The ministry that you hold near and dear to your heart?

The theology that calls you to separate yourself from another?

The pride in the hard work that you do?  
The glory of a successful ministry?  
The glory of being needed?

Would you be willing to let go of all of these things for the sake of Christ. Because if your pride is keeping you from spreading the gospel, then cut it off and let it go. If a desire for your church to do the entire ministry of the Gospel by itself and not to work with another church is getting in the way, then cut that desire off, and let it go. If your feet won't even let you walk across the street to help someone else because they are not part of your work, because you cannot bring yourself to work with "those people," then cut off your feet (metaphorically). What are you willing to lose for Christ – are you willing to lose your very life.

As I said before, this past week I was at a conference with other ministers. When ministers get together, our natural inclination is to brag about our churches, and to build ourselves up. We build walls around each other, and talk about how great our respective ministries are. Yet, one night, in a small group, one of the members shared his troubles, his worries, and his anxieties. He shared the struggles with his family. He shared the troubles with his vocation. He shared the struggles with his faith. He was in a place of despair. He opened himself up, and lost his sense of security and vulnerability for the rest of us. In return we prayed a prayer that was without any ego, without any theological showing off, and without any walls. He let go of his sense of security, and we let go of our sense of pride in order to share our salt of Christ with each other. All we could do was to be with him, because that was where the salt of Christ led us to be.

Cast off the millstone that holds you down, and look for the ways to live your passion in the world. Reaffirm your passion for ministry, and let nothing but nothing hold you back from being that salt in the most powerful way.

#### *Movement 6 – The Result of Shared Salt*

Let your salt lead you to walk and work with the whole body of Christ. My brothers and sisters, my challenge for you is not to look to make new ministries. I am not challenging you to look to start something new, but instead to look for someone who is already working for Christ. Look for that already occurring ministry, and share your gifts. Look for that person setting up a soup kitchen and offer to help. Don't do your own thing, but do Christ's thing, share your salt, and in your passion, you will have peace. Look for that person who is putting together a clothing drive and offer to help. Even if you were planning on starting a blanket ministry, or something similar, let go of your own desires, and instead join in with the other and work together for the sake of Christ. If you want to offer a ministry for children, let's look to how we can work with other churches, and in our salt we will have peace. If you want to offer a ministry to people struggling with addictions, let's look for an existing group we can support, and in our salt we will have peace. Imagine if the disciples, instead of trying to stop the man, joined with him in proclaiming Christ's name and healing people of their afflictions. Imagine the impact and power that would have and know that in their salt they would find and have peace.

We have already started to share our salt with each other and to be at peace with each other. When we help out the Church of the Redeemer with the Interfaith Hospitality Network, we are letting our salt join in with other's salt. Through working with another church, we are offering shelter and food to the homeless, and in our salt we have gained peace with another church. Yesterday we helped out with a Children's festival, and we provided a place for families to gather and experience a good and positive environment. A number of churches were involved,

a number of churches brought their own gifts, shared their talents and time, and we provided a great ministry to the community. In our salt we shared peace. In both of those examples, we are not bringing people to our campus. We are not getting the all-important exposure that we are supposed to get in order to grow. We are not getting the spotlight, but we are living our salt. We are not letting our own pride and agenda get in the way, instead, we are living the Gospel.

This month we are taking an offering for American Baptist World Missions. This offering, along with our other three offerings, is all about being salt and at the same time living in peace. We gather with other churches, because we know there is a need to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We know that the need for the love and the peace of Christ is great, but we know that we cannot meet that need alone. We can't spread the Gospel to all the corners of the earth ourselves, but we when we work with other Baptist churches, when we gather together, then we know that the Gospel will be shared in the cities of Japan, in the villages of Africa, on the shores of Thailand, in the mountains of Europe and in the shanty towns of Mexico. We can work with others to make sure that it happens. We won't get the glory, we won't get the spotlight, but we will be on the side of Christ. Let your salt lead you in your offering.

Walk with those who are walking for justice, love with those who are loving with mercy, pray with those who are praying for peace, and we will be living the salt of Christ. Offer a drink to any who are doing the Lord's work, share with those proclaiming the name of Jesus, and we will be living the salt of Christ. Look for the mission that is happening. Look for the peace that is happening. Look for the hope that is happening, and let your salt join and offer peace.  
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