

Sunday, September 26, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**SERMON**  
*Living Water*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today, we continue our journey through the Gospel of Mark.

Last week we found Jesus, holding a child in his arms. As Gail preached last Sunday, Jesus was teaching them about **true greatness**; a **greatness** that seeks humility, not superiority. He came to teach and show us the way of being “servant of all,” not “first of all.” Today’s reading describes the disciple’s response. Clearly, like us, they need to stay in school.

This is the Gospel of Mark Chapter 9:38-50

## **SCRIPTURE**

### **Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)**

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.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is **not** against us is **for** us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose their reward. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’

For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

The Word of God for the people of God...

### **Sermon**

Please pray with me...

*Lord of joy and mercy, be with us this day as we seek your voice and your guidance. Remove the obstacles that block our commitment and help us to truly be your disciples; for we ask this in Christ’s Name. AMEN.*

Driving up to our cabin in Maine, I pass right through the town of Poland Spring. It's a real place with a real, stunningly pure, mountain spring. Poland Spring Bottling Company siphons off that spring and bottles up that 100% natural pure spring water in a variety of attractive ways and then offers it to everyone who is thirsty. It's a good product.

But when I go up to Maine, I don't buy Poland Spring water because I know another way to tap that spring. A few miles northwest, if you know where to turn, there's an old country road. Off that road, if you know where to look, there is a narrow path into the woods. At the end of that path is a beautiful handmade run off spout from the very same source as the bottling plant and I fill my own bottle there.

You're probably thinking, "Nice little story Bob, but how does that relate to this freaky Gospel passage?"

Well here it is. I think of Christ like that river, CLEAR, pure, perfect water running freely for miles, dancing merrily around rocks, spilling generously over falls and effortlessly pooling into springs along the way. I think of Christianity like the Poland Spring Bottling Company, an INSTITUTION that has access to this beautiful water and packages the liquid goodness into bottles so that people everywhere can have access to it. But Poland Spring Bottling Company is not the source it's the container.

It's easy to confuse Christianity with Christ.

Religion is not God.

The Bible is not God.

Religions and sacred texts are simply the containers, a way to hold together practices and rituals that ENLIVEN and illuminate a portal into the vastness of the Divine. Religion is like a telescope that magnifies a small portion of an infinite cosmos of countless universes. Religion is the lens that reveals.

Ironically enough, the religion that bears the name of CHRIST was NOT founded by CHRIST. The Christian religion was developed over time by human beings into this huge INSTITUTION that, like Poland Spring Bottling Company offers a taste of the Living Water.

The sticky problem that arises is that when we read the Gospels, we find Jesus consistently opposing INSTITUTIONAL boundaries and challenging any attempt to contain the wild flow of the river.

Take this poor struggling disciple John. He was one of the first followers of Jesus. I picture him as a burly, impulsive, emotional man who likes to feel in CONTROL. He works hard to get his head around what's going on with Jesus but it's all so unexpected. Jesus is so unpredictable. But John never gives up.

Earlier in this same chapter of Mark's Gospel, John witnesses his fellow disciples trying in vain to cast out a demon from a young man. They can't do it. Jesus quickly takes care of the problem and the man is made whole. Later that day John notices a guy he's never seen before successfully casting out demons just like Jesus! I'm guessing there's more than a little jealousy going on here as John indignantly tattletales on this foreign exorcist.

"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." He is probably thinking Jesus will be pleased with him for policing proper orthodoxy.

John is attempting to corner the market on this "Living Water" and control who is in and who is out. Jesus quickly points past the "bottling plant" DIRECTLY TO THE RIVER. "Whoever is not against us is for us." Then Jesus goes a step further giving every follower of Christ a bone-chilling warning,

"If you put a stumbling block before these people who you think are not like us, it would be better for you if a great millstone were tied around your neck and you were thrown into the sea!"

Wow! For once Jesus is absolutely clear. There's not much to nuance here. The word stumbling block can also be correctly interpreted as "offend."

If you, Christian, if you follower of Christ, if you offend these others it would be better for you if a great millstone were tied around your neck and you were thrown in the sea. This verse scares me to death, especially as a Minister.

We, who self-identify as Christian, have to be exceedingly careful about trying to domesticate and contain a WILD and unpredictable God. To think and act as if our religious practice is superior or more pleasing to God than someone else's is clearly offensive to God and actually works against the kingdom of Heaven by blocking access to the source. This is so critical that Jesus resorts to exaggerated hyperbole to further drive home the point. "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."

I am quite sure Jesus was NOT advocating for self-mutilation, but the cutting edge of the metaphor comes into focus when you consider that the Jewish law strictly prohibits practicing religious rituals in the temple if the priest suffers any physical defect.

Given the context, it seems more likely that Jesus is heavily implying that religious practice is secondary to actually living a life fully immersed in God. Religion is only the container. We need to be filled with something more. Religion alone is just an empty shell. This was Jesus consistent theme. He repeatedly disregards the boundaries established by religion. He heals people on the Sabbath. He speaks with women and even touches them. He frequently befriends the wrong kind of people,

like those loathsome, heretical Samaritans, the unclean lepers, demoniacs, drunks, and sex workers. Jesus always pushes us past the narrow confines of religious certainty and self-comforting ritual.

To follow Jesus is to PLUNGE into the vast unknown rapids of the RIVER itself, the ever moving, always changing, and riotously uncontrollable source.

Jesus teaches us that God will not be owned or captive to one merchant. Yet the religion that bears Christ's name is commonly thought of by non-Christians as exclusive, intolerant, judgmental, legalistic, and narrow-minded.

Gandhi was once asked, "What is the major stumbling block for the spread of Christianity in India?" He quickly responded, "Christians."

It would appear that "stumbling block" and "Christianity" have become synonymous.

I really don't think that Jesus is necessarily for or against organized institutional religion. The river flows with or without us. Our containers can be helpful.

Religious practices are GREAT if they lead us to the River and not pretend to BE the River. At its best, church can draw us close to the Source and give us an organization that binds us together in love, a place where together we find strength and nurture spiritual growth as we participate in living out the good news of the gospel.

While I often find that I must apologize for Christians, I can't quit Christianity. I am an unapologetic follower of Jesus. I want to reclaim the word Christian. I want to reclaim a gospel of radical inclusion, a gospel of unbridled freedom, abundant grace, and sacred humility.

I pray that our religious practices - from our private prayers to our public gatherings - from our small groups to our committee meetings - always lift up and promote clear pathways all the way to the Living Water. I pray that we would never ever be a stumbling block to anyone who is thirsty.

I hope you'll join me in this wild adventure of continually discovering

The true source of our religion that is the continual flow of LIVING WATER. AMEN

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