

Sermon 30 September 2018
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

In many ways life is a cycling, ultimately forward moving school for the soul. A good educator knows we do not learn our lessons in a straight line. Reason is only one tool in the bag of instruments we need and use to grow in understanding and, hopefully, wisdom. A person who spends all their time in a classroom, listening to lectures, taking notes, and reading books will not find their way to wisdom. While lectures and books offer us knowledge and understanding, often attained by a teacher's hard work and even suffering, wisdom is forged in the fire of experience.

Knowledge is the raw material heated white hot and hammered, pounded into wisdom by experience. The lessons a student learns in class are the unfinished framework of a new building under construction—the wiring, plumbing, walls, flooring and roof, not to mention the pictures hanging on the walls are built by experience.

Jesus spent time teaching his disciples, but he knew they would only begin to understand the important lessons outside the classroom, in the world. The greatest part of his work with them had to happen in their hearts—and the work of the heart is in the confluence of knowledge and experience. We can learn a lot about humanity by reading history and studying psychology, but the best of that learning remains inert until we feel the living pulse of understanding in the lives of the people we meet on the road.

The disciples have heard Jesus talk about humility and service for months. They have watched him walk among the people, speak to the lowly and the highborn, spend time with the elite in the synagogue and with the reprobate at the tavern. In the beginning, the disciples were like the others who met Jesus—they were drawn to the captivating force of his words about God, and his display of power healing the sick and delivering the emotionally and spiritually bound. The brilliant flash of his presence blinded them to the essence of his message.

Jesus takes them on the road and they experience the power for themselves. It is an intoxicating experience, and when the healing

power of God works through them, they are swept away into a new world. Here they are, common men, fishermen and tax collector, seeing miracles happen at their touch and the sound of their words. Still they miss the essence of Jesus' message, and the scope and impact of what he has come to do in the world.

Last week Jesus catches the disciples arguing about which of them is the greatest. They are missing the target by a mile—Jesus is leading them north to godly selflessness, they are looking south with pride to worldly prestige. This week, the circle of their concern has expanded, but not by much. Last week it was about them as individuals, this week it is about them as a group. How hard it is for followers of Christ to grasp the scope of what he has come to do—how far he reaches to rescue the wandering lost!

Last week it was *who is the greatest*; this week it is *they are not one of us*. The two phrases that stand out for me in this morning's gospel are *not one of us* and *these little ones*. Let's consider them one at a time.

It is one of the most understandable and damnable tendencies in the church—or in virtually any organization—the tendency to draw in our group and to exclude others. *We saw others casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop them because they were not one of us*. There are times when it is perfectly appropriate to say *not one of us*. For instance, I say I am a Methodist and not a Baptist. John Wesley persuaded me to think about God in particular ways—and one of those ways is to accept that Jesus is working in communities other than my own, and in ways different from what I expect.

That is surely one of the messages Jesus is trying to teach his disciples in this morning's reading. They have to learn that God is working beyond their little group. They have been chosen and are being equipped for a singularly important ministry. They will take Jesus' message of God love and redemption to the far corners of the world, but they must first learn that they will find God already at work whenever they go.

Jesus listens to their complaint about the outside group and responds quickly. *“Do not stop them,”* he says. *They are part of the great work. “Whoever is not against us is for us.”*

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The disciples are learning through experience. They are learning what Jesus means when he talks about humility, selflessness and service. They have grown up in a world that is constantly dividing and rarely multiplying the community of inclusive grace. It is the greatest presumption to think that God has a preference for *us* over *them*. It is one of the hardest lessons for us to unlearn.

We are graced and privileged to be children of God, saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We must never underestimate or diminish the wonderful importance of that that. But we must never confuse the universal work of Christ with the work of the Christian church.

When Mohandas Gandhi lived in South Africa, he was drawn to Christ, but the exclusionary policies of the government *and* the church drove him away from institutional Christianity. He was *brown* you see, and because he was not *white* he was prohibited from enjoying all the privileges of South African citizenship. The apartheid policies of the government and the corresponding segregation beliefs of the church excluded him. Gandhi turned away from the church, because the church turned its back on him. In rejecting the exclusionary Jesus of the church of South Africa, Gandhi found his way to Jesus who is the Christ for the world. There are ways to read history that would make you wonder how the church survived at all through the centuries. We must never confuse the universal work of God in Christ with the work of the Christian church.

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Jesus’ harsh words at the end of this morning’s reading are not intended for those who wander and search for God *outside* the church. Of course his words are not to be taken literally. Jesus does not want us to cut off our hands or feet or pluck out an eye. He uses such violent and vivid metaphors to emphasize the seriousness of what he is talking about. His metaphorical, hyperbolic words are directed straight to the

heart of any community that draws hard, restrictive lines to exclude others from the grace of God.

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Jesus speaks of *little ones*. We understandably think of children; only a few verses earlier he took a child onto his lap to talk about truth and faith. But the little ones Jesus speaks of here are not identified by their chronological age. He is talking about anyone who is among the *lost*, anyone who is caught in the mire of the world. Anyone who feels a gnawing unrest of soul in a dark or challenging time is a *little one*. Anyone who calls out in any unexpected moment of spiritual hunger is a *little one*—a child who realizes they are lost and can not find their way home. It is as if they are lost in a dark forest, unable to find a path out of the tangle of their emotions and yearnings. They look for a light, but the light that they trusted for years has revealed itself as darkness. The places they trusted to be shelters and thresholds of endless possibilities are revealed to be dead ends, leading them nowhere.

Augustine said, “*Our souls are restless, O God, until they find their rest in thee.*” We are all *little ones* when we are lonely, we are all little ones when we are weary, we are all little ones when we feel lost, we are all little ones when we are in physical, emotional, or spiritual pain—we are all little ones in the crises of life.

Whenever someone finds a path that gives them hope and the promise of rest, we should encourage them, not condemn them if the path does not conform to our expectation. If it is a path that leads them toward a place of dignity and wholeness beyond themselves, toward the place where they begin to realize their life is wonderfully about much more than themselves—we should encourage them. We should even celebrate the joy and peace they feel with their new vision and commitment. We should pray the path leads them to God.

I’ve told some of you a story about George Hunter, a professor and friend of mine. George’s work required him to travel a lot, and George never passed up an opportunity to talk about his faith in Christ. He would take his seat on an airplane and get to know his neighbor. Soon enough the conversation would turn to what George did for a living and,

in his own nonthreatening way, George would share something of his faith. Mostly he would listen to what his new companion had to say. He listened without judgment.

When the arrival doors opened at their destination, George would often offer his card to his new friend and, if they were following a path that seemed misguided or inadequate to him, he would say something like, *“I hear what you believe about God and life. God bless you as you find your way. Take my card; it has my phone number and address on it. If what you believe now is ever not working for you, please get in touch with me—whenever it is not working for you, give me a call.*

The apostle Peter tells us to *always be ready to give reason for the hope that is within—always be ready to share our hope and our faith in gentle, respectful, loving ways.*

My friend George Hunter understood what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples that day on the road. God is at work in the world—throughout the world. God’s grace can work in mysterious ways even in the hearts of those who do not know Christ as we know him. The Holy Spirit speaks in their conscience and guides them in a path that will lead them to life. So what if they are not one of us. They are one of God’s *little ones.*