



A COMMUNITY OF SHALOM

Mark 9:38-50



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CCUMC/BCUMC/TCUMC
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Now here's a passage that has some pretty tricky elements, eh? Images of children stumbling, people sinking in the sea with millstones around their necks, body parts chopped off or gouged out. Blechh! It just doesn't sound like the Jesus I know and love – kind, compassionate, gentle -- never a harsh word Starting with what's referred to as “The Unauthorized Exorcism” – ending with a reflection on salt, what could it all mean?

We've learned that biblical authors put a story's elements together intentionally. They always seem to have some ulterior motive. These elements have meaning separately, but more importantly, together – let's see if we can figure out why.

First, notice that the passage begins with a problem person -- the unauthorized exorcist – And it ends with the words “be at peace with one another.” The theme that links these sayings is the life of the community; our common life together. How can we live in such a way that we will become a community of Shalom. That is, peace and wholeness between each other.

What do you think of when you think of the word ‘church’? Like me, I assume you picture a church like ours – a local church, pretty and well kept, maybe a pointy white steeple?

Ok. Now -- picture a small living room in a one-bedroom house. It's evening and the room is lit by the dim glow of one, maybe two oil lamps on a table surrounded by a dozen or more people. These are the disciples gathered at Peter's house in Capernaum. It's the beginning of the Jesus movement that will eventually become the Christian church, but right now, it's a motley group of folks who dropped everything to follow some radical preacher-teacher-healer-exorcist-miracle worker-rabbi named Yeshua ben Yusef. We call him Jesus.

There they are, in the warm glow of lamplight, trying to understand – trying to comprehend Jesus, his teachings, and his ministry. It's crucial that they get this; after all, they left their homes and jobs, risking being seen with somebody who could get them killed by the Romans on one hand, or excommunicated from their faith on the other. Nobody wants to end up on the wrong end of a Roman sword – or cross.

The risk these people took was enormous. Why? Why would they take such a risk? Because what they were hearing and seeing in Jesus showed them a radical and new understanding of God – of what God is like, what God expects, and what it means to be part of the people of God.

We have this same need in 2015. We want to know God – What does God want and expect from us. We want to know how to live in relationship with God, how to experience life as God intends, and what it means to be a part of God’s family – the faith community.

This is more than simply what it means to be part of a local church today – in worship or in a committee meeting. Let’s focus on what those dozen or so people in that dim room in Capernaum were focused on -- the bottom line: what does God want from me?

Now, Jesus was a deeply spiritual person who spent long hours alone with God, and having the unique qualification of being the Son of God, had a connection with God that we can barely grasp. But it didn’t take a prophet to see what was coming down the pike in 1st century Judaea. The fires of revolution had been lit, and more was on the way. The whole area was a tinderbox, ready to burst into flames of rebellion and war. Jesus knew it. He predicted it. Fascinating stuff –google “Jewish Revolt” to find out all about what happened only 30-some years after Jesus’ crucifixion.

When that core group of followers gathered around that table, Jesus wasn’t teaching them etiquette -- or Roberts’ Rules of Order for future meetings. These folks were going to be in danger, and Jesus was preparing them to be a radically transformed community – a community of shalom. They were going to need each other -- they were going to be “salted with fire.” They had to learn how to be the family of God for each other. It was a matter of survival.

On the other hand, we live in very different times. Sophisticated social institutions like retirement funds, or complicated healthcare systems meet most of our needs. We live in safe, fairly well-run communities. We’re a long way from that dangerous, candle-lit, house gathering in Capernaum.

But we can’t survive very well alone in our nice suburban homes for long, can we? We’re created to live in community. We have a need for other people that goes to

our very core. We were created for life together – to take care of each other. Loneliness is a huge problem in our culture, and the TV remote or mouse in our hands doesn't help. We all need to know that we are loved and cared for by real people, who know us and accept us as we really are, and who are there for us in our good and our not-so-good moments.

Jesus is teaching the disciples – and us – how to be a community of shalom, which means wholeness, healing, and peace; the kind of community that'll be nurturing, affirming, and life-giving.

How often do we find just the opposite? Relationships grow poisoned, communities grow toxic; the group seems to make itself and each other more diseased the more they meet. Some families are toxic like that; and the tragedy is that many churches are just as toxic. But the Good News is there's a better way.

How? How do we become a community of shalom instead of a toxic church? The most important thing is to refuse to divide the world up into "us vs. them." That's the point of the 'Unauthorized Exorcist.' Someone who was not part of their inner circle was casting out demons in Jesus' name, and the disciples didn't like it (they had recently been unable to do the same thing for a boy and Jesus had to come and do it for them).

But Jesus didn't see the world the way the disciples did. He didn't recognize an "authentic 'us'" vs. "'them' the bad guys." Was that other guy casting out demons trying to help people? Then leave him alone. Don't be so quick to rebuke(!) – to criticize people who aren't in our little club. God is bigger than that, and we should be, too.

So, if that's how we should be responding to outsiders, how then, should we respond to insiders – to each other in this new and radical community of shalom?

The millstone. Jesus loved to exaggerate. A millstone around the neck and thrown into the sea? Jesus is saying that the measure of our authenticity is our willingness to go out of our way for our weaker members. Remember last week – the child represents the marginalized, the least of these. The little ones must not be overlooked. In fact, they have to be especially cared for. The weaker members of our community who can't protect themselves are to be the object of our concern. We would no more overlook their needs than we would tie a millstone around our necks

and jump in the lake! No – this community is not known by how well our leaders are pampered (too bad – jk!) but by how well we watch out for the little ones among us.

Now, no community is perfect. We aren't perfect. We all sin. We all miss the mark occasionally. We all do things we know we shouldn't. It's intentional and Jesus uses the imagery of the hands. I know I would rather have the remote in my hands instead of a serving spoon or a hammer, or even a phone if that's what's called for -- to go out of my way to help someone in need. What shall we do with hands that cause us to stumble?

And how often do we walk our well-worn paths of comfort and security – of low-risk and entertainment – instead of walking to places of insecurity and need, where we could bring hope and help. We sin with our feet. What shall we do with feet that cause us to stumble?

And our eyes? We see something shiny, and don't we have to have it? We see things that might increase our pleasure, our comfort, or our security, and we overlook the suffering and pain that is so obvious in our world. What shall we do with eyes that cause us to stumble?

So there's no shortage of sinning that goes on in any given community. What do we do about it? What do we do with all these sinners stumbling around? A toxic community would use its own standards of behavior to judge and condemn one another. Fingers pointed, accusations made, rumors circulate, criticism, bitterness, taking sides, forming alliances – we could make our own reality show called “Church Survivor!” The results aren't pretty – or Christian.

Jesus' community of shalom is radically different. One commentator used the term ‘Sword of Judgment.’ The sword of judgement we're swinging around so indiscriminately is only used against ourselves -- never against each other. In a community of shalom I'm not worried about your hands, your feet, or your eyes because I'm worried about mine! Remember? Remove the plank from your own eye first so you can see to take the speck out of your neighbor's? My sin is what I'm supposed to be ruthless about, not yours. I don't get to chop off your foot, your hand, or gouge out your eyes – only mine.

It's interesting to note that Jesus didn't mentioned ears – do our ears not cause us to stumble?

My responsibility in this radical new community of shalom is to admit my own hypocrisy because, no, I don't live up to the standards that I proclaim publicly. None of us do. We have to look in the mirror, stop believing our own excuses, stop the denial, drop the pretense. The sword of judgment in my hands is aimed only at my shortfalls -- not yours or anyone else's. "We are not a community of execution, but examination."

There are communities that survive; but they don't thrive. Like hospital food. It keeps you alive and it's nutritious, but... Kind of like oatmeal without salt or sugar. We're created to be a community that blesses each other when we gather. Our gatherings should bring us in contact with God -- who loves us -- and with real humans who are the instruments of God's love -- God's hands, feet, and eyes. We are the sources of shalom for each other and for our community -- and for our community!

So these weird and difficult teachings of Jesus lead us to a moment of reflection -- as usual. How are we doing? Are there changes we need to make in how we spend our time? In what we give our hands to do? Remember that old saying: "Idle hands are the devil's playground." Do we hold the remote more dearly than we hold the hand of someone who's hurting?

What about where we go -- our feet? Are we stuck in the habit of taking the path of least resistance? Are we going where we can hear God speaking, hear God's instructions, where we can offer a cup of cold water in Jesus' name?

Are there changes we should be making in our eyes -- in what we allow to seduce us into buying? Are we looking squarely at the pain that's all around us, but not really seeing it?

If we have these high standards of behavior for our hands, feet, and eyes, are we using those standards to better ourselves -- or to criticize and judge others?

We can be -- and, personally, I think we're doing a great job -- a kind of community that people everywhere are desperately looking for: a community that exists to affirm the very presence of God on earth -- in each other; a community of shalom -- of wholeness, healing, peace and acceptance.

Amen.