



Week of September 24, 2018

Don't Get Mired In the Mud

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:38-50

He was six foot eight and, given the situation, it was a good thing. We had just finished another portage in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State and he stepped into the pond to lower his canoe. The water

was only about a foot deep at the shore and yet down he went, about six feet down, until all we could see were his neck and head. "Hang onto the canoe!" I yelled as I sprinted to help him. "I guess that's why they call it 'Mud Pond,'" we laughed.

There are a lot of things that can go wrong on an adventure. Certainly that has been my experience on many of the trips I've been privileged to participate in. Whether out in the wilderness, on highways and byways, or through a city center, you can hardly begin to predict what might happen to stymie your plans, though it helps to try and thereby try to be prepared.

Of all the things that can throw you off track or stop you in your tracks, the most difficult one is when members of your group get cranky and begin bickering. Almost any challenge can be overcome if you keep working together. Almost every challenge will undo you if you don't.

In this Sunday's Gospel Lesson, Jesus' disciple, John, tells him that he and the other disciples tried to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name, because he wasn't "following us." We can understand John's concern. After all, there need to be some boundaries around who we can let speak, or heal, or do any number of different good things in Jesus' name, right? People need to sign on the dotted line with all of our beliefs and commitments, don't they? They need to understand Jesus in the same way we do, pray to and worship Jesus as we do, name and call out sin as we do, don't they?

Jesus answers John and us (this is my paraphrase): "No! No, they don't." His actual words are, "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 here's our situation. We are on an adventure, an expedition, if you will. And we are in this together. We need all hands on deck (I might be mixing metaphors, but you get the idea). Back to Mud Pond, we need all the help we can get to keep each other from getting mired in the mud and on track to our journey's end. We are far too prone toward divisiveness, a critical spirit, exclusionary tendencies, and holier than thou attitudes. Our petty differences, though we never think they are petty at the time, distract us and deter us from our God-given mission.

As Mark 9 continues, Jesus challenges his disciples in graphic ways to shift their attention from others' shortcomings to their own. Specifically, he exhorts them to look at how their own behavior is getting in the way of others moving forward on their journey of discipleship. He calls them to consider in what ways are they discouraging rather than encouraging others. Instead of trying to rid others of their faults,

Jesus calls his disciples to ruthlessly rid themselves of their own attitudes and actions that serve as a stumbling block for others.

We've got too much to do and too far to go to turn on each other and trip each other up. As the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 5:14-15, "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for your patience with me and for continuing to challenge me. Thank you that you love me as I am and you invite me to grow. Forgive me for the times I focus on the "speck" in someone else's eye while not dealing with the "log" in my own. Forgive me for the ways I discourage others rather than encourage them to trust your love, follow you, and serve you. Enable me to trust your love and your ability to work in and through the lives of others, even when I cannot see it or understand it. And, by your grace, continue to love me and work in and through me, even though I still have so far to go in learning and living as your disciple. I pray with thanks in your holy name. Amen.

Something(s) to try:

- Look back at your attitudes and actions over the past week. Name and confess to God any that might have discouraged rather than encouraged someone to take another step forward in God's love. Be especially mindful of your attitudes and actions toward anyone you think might not be as far along in their journey of discipleship as you.
- Think of a way and take action to offer encouragement to someone in their walk with Jesus.
- Think of someone who is doing good things in your community who's understanding of Jesus might be somewhat different than your own. Pray for him or her, thank God for him or her, and consider writing a note or giving a call of encouragement to the person.
- Pray about whether there is a "speck" you are focusing on in someone else's eye. Talk with God about how you may be allowing your focus on others' faults to distract you from dealing with your own. After praying about it, talk with someone about your commitment to changing the focus of your attention and how you will take your next steps of discipleship.

Memory/Meditation Verse:

"Whoever is not against us is for us." Mark 9:40

Other recommended readings for this week:

Numbers 11:4-29

Esther 7:1-10; 9:20-22

Psalms 124

Psalms 19:7-14

James 5:13-20