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Drastic Peace – First Presbyterian Church of Allegan.

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

⁴² “And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁴ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁵ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁶ where“

‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’^[e]

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

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Have you ever seen someone get upset because something good was being done by someone else? This sort of things happens all of the time. Perhaps it is a rival sports team who makes a really great play or a coworker from another department who comes up with a great new way to do something.

In our scripture today, the disciples are upset because someone (who wasn't part of their group) was out doing something wonderful in Jesus name. --But of course, because their group wasn't getting credit for it, because it wasn't furthering the glory and the mission of these disciples, the disciples felt that they needed to put a stop to it --immediately! In the view of the disciples this interloper was overstepping the boundaries and taking over their jurisdiction. They were the true followers of Jesus! They were doing things the right way. Because this other person's theology wasn't part of their group, they were immediately judged to not be worthy to do their ministry. Because their theology was wrong, their ministry was somehow considered bad and tainted.

As Christians we do the same thing all of the time. Christianity is filled with hundreds of denominations of churches, which all disagree with

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each other to a greater or a lesser extent. And it is true that our theology is different. On one end of the spectrum, we have the mainline churches, where there is theological agreement that women can be pastors and where the consumption of alcoholic beverages and dancing are not considered to be problematic to your soul. ---On the other end of the denominational spectrum, you have some conservative evangelical churches where only men are pastors and where drinking and dancing will get you kicked out of your church. While these churches may be very different theologically on many things, they are alike in that they both can do many good things for the community. Both churches can and do many things in the name of Jesus. --Churches all across the theological spectrum can have food pantries and soup lunches and after school programs for the neighborhood children. Our theological disagreements about who can be ordained to be a minister of word and sacrament, and what is allowed for a person to do at a party should practically make no difference to our work of feeding a starving person or helping someone who needs a friend to get them through a difficult time. In this is the first point in our passage today. Jesus reminds us that anyone who is doing good in the name of Jesus should not to be stopped. That person is furthering the kingdom of Christ, which is larger than one church or one denomination.

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We are not to be spending our time judging and deciding if another Christian group is theologically close enough to us to work with them or not. There is too much work to be done in this world to turn up our noses at helping hands that may theologically see things a bit differently than we do.

The second point that Jesus makes in this passage is the one that seems drastic to us. What in the world does this mean about cutting off your own hand or poking your own eye out? Is Jesus really wanting Christians to be involved in maiming ourselves? --You may think that if you were trying to interpret this metaphor literally. This part of this passage always used to confuse me until I remembered that Jesus often used the image of body to describe the workings of the church.

In the Biblical metaphor of the church, each person involved in the group is described as one part of the whole body. Some people are very good at the implementation of things and are the hands of the operation, while others excel at seeing or planning what needs to be done. In every group, there are always the "go getters" the ones who can move the organization forward, who act like feet taking the organization to a new place.

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But in the analogy today, Jesus tells us that in the life of our organization, it would be better for us to get rid of a person that cannot function in peace with others than to try to bring them along. If there is someone who can only see faults with what the organization is trying to do, I believe that what Jesus is telling us that it is better for the greater mission of the church to not listen to them anymore. If there is someone whose hand is not reaching out in love, but who is acting sinful ways, it would be better if we cut them right out of the system. There is too much work to be done with the hurting people of the world than to spend time and energy fighting with a person who is bound and determined to have power struggle within the organization.

A few months ago at a Presbytery meeting, I ended up sitting near the guest speaker Landon Whitsett during lunch. Landon was the Vice Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA in 2010. The conversation at our table was of course about churches and how to make them more effective and productive. During the conversation, Landon recommended a book by Robert Sutton that every session should read. The book was basically an argument for organizations to get rid of toxic individuals that brought down morale and productivity at a company. With example after example of how one person's negative or bullying attitude can sap the

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energy and the creativity right out of a group of people, Sutton made his case that the goal and the purpose of the organization was a much more important thing than the toleration of an organizational bully. With lots of data, Sutton encouraged organizations to fire people who were effective at their work, but who had intolerant and negative attitudes who were undermining the workplace. --This is what I think is going on in the second section of the passage today. Jesus is basically saying that for the sake of the least of these among us, for the sake of the work of God's kingdom, you may need to cut off people from your group in order to further the cause of the gospel. Or you may need to limit the rights and privileges of your own group in order to keep the peace with others.

In Northern Ireland, The Troubles there in the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants has a long history. It goes all the way back to the 1600's when Irish Catholic's land was confiscated and given to Protestant Settlers. From that unjust beginning, strife and conflict continued, with Irish Catholic forces seeking for centuries to be free from the rule of the British Protestant government. The conflict in Northern Ireland rose to a boiling point in the late 1960's and through the 1990's. One young couple, Mary and Niall, described what it was like living in northern Ireland in the early 1980's.

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“We didn’t want war, but war found our family. My husband’s family business was blown up. The local post office was robbed so many times by paramilitary troops that it had to close down. We had incredible choices to make. How do you deal with bombs that are being set off by the IRA in the family garden so as to blow up soldiers, and how do you deal with buses being set on fire right outside of your house? How do you keep your children out of the line of fire between the British soldiers and the IRA?”

One day Mary looked up from changing a diaper to see that the IRA were out simply doing target practice in their back field, and when she looked out the other side of her house, she saw that the British Army were coming with their guns at the ready, about to go through her house to try to arrest and capture the IRA out back. Mary was struck by how many lives were being lost on all sides due to the war. In that year alone, over 30 Protestant, Catholics and soldiers would die in the conflict.

One of the people working to defuse the conflict was a Presbyterian Elder named Joe Campbell. Initially, he directed a YMCA in Northern Ireland in one of the most conflicted areas. His vision was to create a place for youth to come and to build healthy relationships between the Catholics and the Protestants. But he soon came to realize that those childhood friendships would be torn apart when the police would fire into a group of

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rioters, either aiming at their legs or even higher, killing protesters. The anger and the revenge and the retaliation for destroyed lives on both sides was simply escalating the level of violence in Northern Ireland. Increasing use of force was met with even greater force. Campbell knew that he needed a change. He and his family ended up coming over to the United States for a 10 month sabbatical to learn how to facilitate peace through the Mennonite Peace Institute in Goshen Indiana. There he learned about restorative justice and other ways of mediation and peace building. When Campbell returned to Ireland, he and a Catholic friend founded a non-profit organization dedicated to teaching people how to build peace with their neighbors. Some of their boldest initiatives providing free training on restorative justice to the police force. --Instead of shooting into a crowd to break up a protest of angry Irish Catholics, Campbell encouraged the police to instead use a fire hose to force the rioters to stop. Such actions significantly lowered the stakes and the need for revenge. --A wet and frustrated protester got over his anger much quicker than one whose brother had been shot and killed while protesting next to him.

While their non profit was making slow progress with retraining the police force there were plenty of opportunities to provide mediation between Protestants and Catholics in disputes. Many neighborhoods were

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very much divided by walls and historical feuds. There were often reenactments and parades in memory of battles and the dead were sparks that set people off again.

In September of 2005, Campbell received a panicked phone call. Rioting was breaking out after police tried to reroute an annual Protestant Parade away from a Catholic neighborhood outside of Belfast. However, because this was the traditional parade route, there was great resistance to changing it. In the past, this particular parade had given rise to great fear and violence. In the two nights of riots over the proposed changing of the parade route, over 50 police officers had been hurt. In desperation, the city government called Campbell for help. In a series of meetings back and forth between the parade organizers, the police department and the Catholic homeowners, Campbell mediated an agreement between the three sides. --The Protestant parade would be allowed to go down it's traditional route through the Catholic neighborhood, and their signs and banners could be carried, but the concession was that the Protestants had to parade through the streets in silence. They had to limit their right to the freedom of speech for the greater good of peace in their community.

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In conclusion, our passage today speaks to many things, but it speaks loudly for peace. When “others” are doing good in the name of Christ, we are not to stop them just because they don’t belong to our church and their theology may be different than ours. We are to let them do their work in peace. The goal of the work of the kingdom takes priority over who gets the credit. And when the attitude of someone in our own organization stops the energy and brings only the spirit of negativity and complaint, we are not to silently put up with their destructive behavior, we need to be willing to gently confront them and to continue on our path of kingdom building without them.

And finally, we need to take a good hard long look at ourselves. If there are some behaviors that we are engaging in that are not keeping the peace, that are not building up the kingdom, that are not bringing about peace in God’s kingdom, we need to voluntarily pull back from those behaviors and limit ourselves for the greater good of all.

And finally, the peace that God is seeking within the establishment of the kingdom of God is a bigger goal than any denomination, any one complaining person and it is larger than you and me. May we get our priorities in order and put the love of God and our neighbors at the top of

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our list. May we be willing to set aside our own petty needs for recognition and credit, and get about the work that really matters. Amen.

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