

“Power and Pettiness”

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James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

The disciples are perturbed because they caught others casting out demons in Jesus’ name. But they weren’t Jesus’ followers. They weren’t part of the group! No, Jesus! They aren’t one of us!

Petty.

Jesus says, whoever is doing good things in my name, is worthy. Don’t judge, rejoice.

Power.

Stumbling Block: *skandalizein*: *“The sense of the verb is being so horrified that one simply cannot remain in the place or go forward along the path where one had that experience” (Sharon H. Ringe).*

In context, this refers not just to children or those new to the faith, but those on the lower spectrum of the social hierarchy.

I think of the latest reports from the Catholic church and the sexual abuse. I think of pastors who prey on congregants who are vulnerable. I think of “fine upstanding men” because, sadly, it is often men, who go to church every Sunday, then go to work on Monday and hassle female employees. Stories over the years have come to me from those who have felt helpless against such *skandalizein*. Like the animal world, predators find the weakest or youngest prey to attack.

In our country this week we have watched more of this predatory behavior play out in our judicial system, in the entertainment industry, and in our White House. The President hasn’t been charged with sexual abuse violations yet, but he admits to always hitting opponents of his twice as hard as they hit him. He attempts to weaken those who don’t agree with him. The allegations will be made. Justice will be met.

But I can’t overstate the severity for anyone in a power position to harm the body or soul of another. To have a leader that rambles about the ridiculousness of women accusers, a leader who uses language of hate and cruelty that children can hear in their living rooms, a leader who denigrates entire races of people – it is better that he has a millstone around his neck and be thrown into the sea.

The greater the position, the greater the responsibility and care.

These are the words of Jesus Christ. These are powerful words and he meant them for hearers and readers through the ages. We may not scandalize one another.

Power

People in power can lead with honor and integrity or with abuse and destruction. Jesus continually bumped into people who had power. They were people drunk on power. People like the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees. Some of these are church folk.

Leaders of the church have a responsibility.

3Leaders cannot lead with pettiness. Here are some examples:

In the book of Matthew, in the 22nd chapter, we see the Herodians try to entrap Jesus with pettiness – “Teacher, we know that you are sincere and that you teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. So, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” **Pettiness.**

Jesus: “Why are you putting me to the test? Show me the coin. Give to Emperor what is the Emperor’s and give to God what is God’s. **Power.**

Then the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection. Hey, Jesus, if a man dies and his wife is left to marry his brother and again it happens, and finally she has been married to seven brothers, who will she be married to at the resurrection? **Pettiness.**

Jesus: “You are wrong for you do not know the scriptures or the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage. **Power.**

Then the Pharisees got a hold of him, and one of them, a lawyer, tested him and asked, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **Pettiness.**

And Jesus said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” **Power**

Cut off body parts? Literally? The most conservative Christians I know are some of my own relatives. But even if they believe a woman should never go to worship without covering her head and should not wear jewelry and not speak in the midst of the congregation, I have yet to see one who takes these verses seriously. I do not have one maimed or gouged-out-eyeball relative.

In context, could this possibly mean that when there are factions in the community who are causing harm, in-fighting, or damaging the name of Jesus, they must be removed? This is a tricky situation. How do we decide these actions? Just because they are different? Does there have to be a *skandalizein*?

Boundaries: Who’s in and who’s out? Who decides?

Inclusivity and Exclusivity. How far should a community go in including those who are different? How far does a community go in excluding those whose values and customs are “too” different?

Example: A past church I served. Welcomed (sort of) a black congregation to use our church facility on Sunday afternoons. But the complaints began. Ridiculous complaints about Kleenex left in the pew. Crumbs in the kitchen.

Then we invited a Young Life group to use our facility on Sunday evenings. But the complaints began. Ridiculous complaints. A broken ceiling tile, the cardboard kind.

People with perceived power can make statements which are unflattering to the Christian community they profess to be part of. “We can’t let our church be destroyed like this!”

Where is the power and where is the pettiness? Kleenex in the pew seems petty. A congregation using our church to praise God seems powerful.

A broken ceiling tile seems petty. A group of young people loving God seems powerful.

I have to say this: Please listen carefully. This is where this church has FAILED.

YOU HAVE FAILED TO CUT OFF OR CUT OUT OTHER PEOPLE! This congregation is remarkable for the way you WELCOME, ACCEPT, AND AFFIRM PEOPLE WHO WANT TO JOIN YOU HERE FOR WORSHIP AND CHURCH LIFE. I have been so pleased to be part of such a loving congregation. All churches could learn from you on how to be the real church of Jesus Christ.

Saltiness

Let's talk about salt. Now perhaps some of us need to watch our salt intake due to high blood pressure. Let's set that aside.

When salt is left out of a recipe, it's obvious. The dish is bland. I made a batch of cookies once and forgot the salt. It was *skandalizein*.

Salt brings a pleasing flavor to everything it touches. Salt preserves. Salt heals. Salt melts what is cold and icy.

We are the salt of the earth. Our words and actions are pleasing to those we encounter. We preserve dignity and the souls of those who are trodden down. We bring healing to those who lost hope, lost heart, lost it all. And we melt what is cold and icy in this world. Things like bigotry, misogyny, cruelty, privilege, perceived power.

We melt away the *skandalizein*. Our saltiness takes away the horror and we usher in comradery.

Our power is in our servanthood. Our power is speaking the truth in love. Our power is in refusing those who take the honor and dignity of another person's humanity.

We all have some level of power in our lives. It may be running a company, running a classroom, running a household, or personal decision-making for our days. Sometimes we have more power than we recognize, and also the opposite, we think we have more than we actually do. It's what we do with it. How do we use it? Is it for good? Are we servants to all? Do we celebrate when another has done something wondrous and the goodness of God is shown?

If so, we are helping create a world where petty judgments disappear. We have no need to criticize those who do good things in the name of Jesus. We have no time to wonder who the greatest is, because it just doesn't matter.

And maybe, just maybe, there is a possibility of finding ways to take all those cut-off and cut-out parts of the body and restore them to wholeness. We can remove all the *skandalizein*. No more horror. Because when the pettiness and the hate is gone, the body will heal. And on that great day when Jesus Christ returns, our ears will hear these words, "Well done, good and faithful servants." Amen.