

Holding It All Together  
Mark 9:38 – 50; James 5:13 – 20  
Sunday, September 30, 2018

Throughout this past month, the lectionary (the calendar of prescribed scripture readings for each Sunday) has had us walking through the books of Mark and James. James is a book that we don't often spend a lot of time on. Martin Luther referred to it as "an epistle of straw" that has "nothing of the nature of the gospel in it." He thought that it promoted the idea that we could *earn* our salvation by what we *do* rather than simply through faith in Jesus Christ. James is very much focused on how we *live* and *speak* and *act*, and it says that faith *by itself* is not enough for a Christian; that our faith is *proven* by what we *do*. But Martin Luther thought that it shouldn't be taken as seriously as the letters of Paul.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have found this past month of working with James and Jesus side by side to be incredibly *rich*. There is just *so much here* about how we, as followers of Christ, are called to live; how we are called to treat the poor and the weak and the vulnerable. It's funny, this past month I have been so swamped with deadlines for doctoral papers, and there have been weddings and funerals and getting into the rhythm of the new school year and sports schedule for our kids. It has been so busy that there were times that I thought, "You know, the lectionary repeats itself every three years. I've preached on these exact texts before. Maybe I could just pull out an old sermon and no one would ever know." But there was something in me that said, "No, let's see what God is saying *now*," and I am *so glad* that I did. Hearing God's word in these texts has come *so easy*, and it has been so enriching to me. I have learned some things that *I* had never seen in these texts before.

So I was really looking forward to seeing how this all wrapped up this week. Next week the lectionary moves on to look at some other books, and I was expecting to have a nice, tidy

summary of our look at James and Mark. I sat down to read through the texts for this week and saw *this*. I don't know if you got a sense of it while we were reading it, but these two texts are incredibly *disjointed*. They are all over the place. When I first read through them, I couldn't really find the connections between the Mark text and the James text. Why are these two paired together? Where do they meet? What holds them together? In fact, I couldn't even get a sense of what each text was saying *on its own*. I had to read through them a couple of times, and I thought, "Maybe I'm just distracted and not in a place where I can focus the way I need to right now." So I read them again and again and thought, "No, it's not me. These readings jump around all over the place!" I had to diagram them and chart them out to try to make sense out of them.

First, we have the story where the disciples come to Jesus talking about this person who is casting out demons in Jesus' name, but he isn't one of them, so should they go stop him? Jesus tells them not to.

Then Jesus tells them that if they put a stumbling block before one of these little ones – which makes us remember that Jesus is still holding the child that he set before the disciples in last week's reading – then it's going to be really bad for you.

Then Jesus talks about how if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out (all while a child is sitting on his lap), because it is better for you to enter life *maimed* than to enter hell *whole*.

Then he talks about being salted with fire, which makes *no sense* at all.

Then we get James saying that if you're suffering, you should pray; if you're cheerful, you should sing songs of praises; if you are sick, the elders should pray over you and anoint you.

Then he talks about confessing your sins to one another and pray so that you can be healed, which I guess goes with the first section about praying and being healed. But then he starts telling this story about Elijah praying that it wouldn't rain and then praying again and it *did* rain, which shows that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. But then he wraps it all up by talking about bringing sinners back to the truth. Then it just *ends*. No *goodbye*. No *grace and peace to you*. Just, "Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." The end.

There are *at least* six different sermons that could be preached on these texts. They are confusing and disjointed and all over the place. And I'm sitting there thinking, "What in the world are we going to *do* with these?" But then you know what I realized? Sometimes *life* is disjointed like that. It's *confusing*, and it goes from one thing to the next without a lot of clarity or continuity. We don't always see how it connects, and we can't always make sense out of it. It doesn't always give us the *closure* that we want; it just moves right on to the next thing. We want *clarity* and *order* and *meaning* in life, but we don't always *get* that. Sometimes our lives feel as disjointed as these two texts.

And sometimes the church, our life *together*, feels like this. We are *literally* disjointed because we have all these separations in the church – Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans. And even within each of *those*, we have conservative branches, liberal branches. We are not *whole*. Our life *together* can be complicated and confusing and

frustrating. You add to the mix our current political climate, and our lives – our *individual* lives and our life *together* – so often feels *disjointed*.

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These two texts, while they raise the *problem*, also present the *solution*. In this incident with the disciples coming to Jesus and complaining about this man who is not one of them but is using Jesus' name to cast out demons, Jesus' response is to broaden their understanding of what it means to be "one of them." He says, "Whoever is not *against* us is *for* us." Jesus is urging them to overcome their disjointedness, their factions, their understanding of who is *in* and who is *out*, by showing them that they are actually all in this together, and that God can use *anyone* to do God's will (even the people we don't think God *should* be using).

Then Jesus tells them not to "put a stumbling block before one of these little ones." Whether he is talking about "little ones" in terms of the child he is currently holding, or in terms of those who are weak and vulnerable in their faith, the idea here is to work together and not do anything that hinders another person's relationship with God. We can overcome this disjointedness by expanding our understanding of what it means to be "one of us," and working together to grow in our relationships with God.

Then Jesus talks about how if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. He gets pretty graphic and extreme here, and we can get distracted by that, but the point is to remove any barriers in your life that are keeping you from God or from one another. One author described this as "a wholehearted commitment to the divine reign."<sup>1</sup> If Christ is the Lord of your life, you cannot let anything get in your way of following him, of loving God and loving your neighbor, not even that which you think is *essential* to your life. So

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, and James Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*. Pg. 530.

it's not just about removing stumbling blocks from *others*, it's about removing stumbling blocks from *yourself*; healing the disjointedness we experience with each other and with God.

Finally, Jesus says, "Everyone will be salted with fire." Salt was used in the ancient world not just for *flavor* but to *preserve* food, and fire all throughout scripture is associated with trials and persecution and purification. So what Jesus is essentially saying here is, "Everyone is going to face challenges. Everyone is going to face trials and challenges and experience the disjointedness of life. You can either let it *ruin* you, or you can allow it to *preserve* your faith; to purify and strengthen you." But the goal of all of this, in the midst of the disjointedness of life, is to be at one with God and with each other. Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves (have this preserving, persevering faith in yourself), and be at peace with one another."

James says that the way that we *do* that is by directing our lives to God in prayer. He starts by saying, "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." The response to every situation in life, good or bad, is to be directed to God. *Pray. Sing songs of praise. Anoint in the name of the Lord.* The way we overcome the disjointedness we experience is by joining ourselves to God, orienting our lives to God.

For James it is all about prayer. That is how we join ourselves to God *and to each other*. He's not just talking about my individual prayer life here. He is saying, "You are all in this together. Pray with and for each other. Confess your sins *to one another*. Bring back those who wander from the truth." In our fractured, disjointed lives and churches and world, James reminds us that we have a responsibility to each other.

We have been called by God into the body of Christ, this community of faith. And we are called to live life together and to care for one another in every way – physically, spiritually, emotionally. Our life together is to be characterized by compassion and comfort and truth. And the ultimate source for this, for our life together, is God. Our life together depends upon the vital relationship of each and every member of the community to God.<sup>2</sup> Through prayer, James is saying, the community is bound together, and our lives are mutually oriented toward God.<sup>3</sup>

This is why we started putting a prayer on the cover of the bulletin each week. So that, when we are apart from one another, we can still be praying the same prayer together, orienting our lives, together, to God.

I've been doing a lot of premarital counseling lately, and my favorite part of that whole process is when I help the couple learn to *pray* together. Nine times out of ten, they have never done it before, because it is such a deeply personal, intimate thing. You are taking the most personal part of yourself – your hopes, your fears, your relationship with God – and sharing that with another person. But *because* of that, every time I do that with a couple, it is this amazing, emotional experience that brings the couple closer together. It helps them *talk* to one another and *trust* each other in an entirely new way.

And this can be the case for *all* of us. In the midst of the disjointedness we experience in our lives, in the church, in the world around us, God calls us to unity in our life together. Directing

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<sup>2</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, After Pentecost 2*. Pg. 63-64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

our lives to God and to each other through prayer is what holds these two texts together, and it's what holds *our lives* together.

So often we feel like we have to hold it all together. Whether it's holding it all together in our own life or whether it's holding the *family* together or holding *relationships* together or holding the *church* together. With all the chaos of life, *someone* has to hold it all together, right? What we are reminded of here is that it is not *our* job to hold it all together. That's *God's* job. *Our* job is to trust God and to hold on to God and to hold on to each other. By doing that – by holding onto God and to each other through prayer – God works to bring wholeness and harmony and peace to a disjointed world and our disjointed lives.

It's like Paul says, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."