

September 30, 2018
Mark 9:38-50
“Worth Your Salt”
Michael Stanfield

John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

‘If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.’ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

‘For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.’ *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. Gracious God make these ancient words avenue to your living word that we may be live more faithfully out of your living presence. We pray this in the name of Christ, Amen.*

Jesus has just overheard the disciples arguing about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom. So he tells them, “Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all.” Well, no sooner are the words out of his mouth than John pipes up and expresses indignance over some guy, not one of the twelve disciples, who has been out there healing people in the name of Jesus.

The implication in John’s tone is, “How dare that guy. *We* are your chosen twelve. We are the ones most like you. Who does he think he is? He’s a nobody; he’s not even following you like the other lesser hangers on who continue to show up for your teaching gigs. But, don’t worry, Jesus; we put him in his place and then we told him to stop.”

Jesus shows infinite patience here. He could have said, “Are you deaf? What part of ‘being last of all and servant of all’ do you not understand?” But he doesn’t. Instead he says, “Leave the man alone. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

The implication is that those who align themselves with the ways of Jesus – regardless of whether they are a mainstream follower of his, regardless as to whether they can say the magic words: “Jesus is my Lord and Savior” are yet to be treated as a brother or sister in Christ.

Jesus is saying that true greatness is about pointing away from self to God. The power to heal is a gift from God. That man doing the healing could have made the claim that the power came only from himself. But he didn’t. He said it came from the Christ. The credit for every good thing he is doing he is giving to God. So leave him alone.

You know, I see this same man among the humble, but by and large, non-Christian documentary film directors and producers when I attend the True/False film. Most of them live hand to mouth and often at great personal risk tell stories of love and truth and justice and injustice that no one else will.

And I see that man among Muslims who are concerned about the marginalized in Columbia when I attend Faith Voices meetings at their mosque downtown.

I see that man among my Buddhist psychotherapist colleagues who are so humble about their extraordinary skills in compassion and the healing of psychic wounds.

“If they are not against us they are for us,” says Jesus. “No one who does a deed of power in my name – the name of love and goodness will thereafter be able to speak evil of what I am really about. So, do not hinder their good work.”

“If they are not against us they are for us.” What does it mean to be against Jesus? Jesus says that it is putting stumbling blocks in front of the “micros pisteuonton eis eme”, which literally translates “the little ones who put all their faith and trust in me.”

Jesus is not talking about children here. He is talking about those, little in stature, little in power, those, most vulnerable. And he’s talking about anyone of us who puts ourselves in a position of vulnerability in order to truly love and offer kindness.

*So, Jesus here is holding up the surrendering of one’s vulnerability, one’s tenderness, one’s humility, one’s honest exposure, in trust, to him as **THE** quintessential sacred act.*

Erecting barriers against the safe expression of humility, honest tenderness, doubt, and the kinds of expressions that involve personal risk to get at the truth, is therefore the quintessential sin.

And what is a stumbling block? It is any type of behavior or attitude that exploits vulnerability, as opposed to aligning with it, honoring it or shoring it up.

Stumbling blocks can come specifically, says Jesus, from:

1. The ways we are using our hands to operate in the world and...
2. The way we are using our feet to get around in the world.
3. The ways we are using our eyes to view ourselves, God and those around us.

The way we use our hands can be open-handed with palms facing upward in surrender and love – or tightfisted and afraid to let go of what we have – ready to fight to keep it.

The way we use our feet can be to get more or to serve.

The way we use our eyes can be to see that person over there acting badly as another vulnerable human soul just like me or one who is less than human and deserving of nothing but dismissal at best, if not outright punishment.

Jesus says we are to cut that out. We are to cut out it out even if it makes us fee maimed. We are to cut out taking away safeguards that protect our poorest, most powerless citizens – the sick and uninsured, minorities, and immigrants.

We are to cut out letting our own striving for greatness get in the way of our ability to be vulnerable ourselves.

You know the only way to have truly loving relationships of any kind is be all in. Real, genuine love and connection that binds us to others at our very roots requires nothing less than absolute surrender. In fact, without it, love is fleeting and elusive, if not completely absent.

So if the way we *use our hands*, that is, how we approach life, is in the way, we need to cut it out. If the way we *see* things is in the way, we need to cut *that* out.

The truth is where the will to power is present, love is absent. Where love is present, power is absent.

That's a problem because every one of us want to hedge our bets. Even with those who are lovable, we want to hold on to a reservation so that if things get a bit hairy we can make a quick exit. But the very act of hedging usually ensures our exit.

That being said, it is always a good idea going in to know whether those with whom you want to connect, those to whom you may want to minister, are capable of real love, real vulnerability themselves. There are some who are so driven by the power motive that vulnerability will only come from them through some devastating external defeat. Even then, they will hide from that defeat in shame, taking it as a personal affront rather than a human reality.

Surrendering oneself and becoming vulnerable is risky – even with those you recognize are capable of great love. After all what could be worse than to share who you really are and what you really think and feel to one you are sure is gifted at loving, only to be discounted, dismissed, or chastised.

The disciples know they are loved by Jesus. But before they love others they want to be fortified. They want to be assured of their greatness in the kingdom. They want to know that they won't get hurt. What Jesus tells them is that what they are wanting is not possible. Loving is called for and loving comes with a price. Putting yourself out there in a very loving way exposes you and it is not always met with a grateful or loving response in kind. It is often met with power. It is often met with unbelieving resistance. It is often met with a put-down.

People who are good at wielding power are usually ashamed of their vulnerabilities. So they react with great defense and even offense when they see it in others. It is why, as disciples, power is seen only as something endowed by God for a time as a function of calling and office to

be used by God for God's purposes – never as something to be sought for personal gain or some kind of ultimate security.

I confessed a couple of weeks ago of my fondness for Dark shows in general and *Ozark* in particular. *Ozark* is about a Chicago accountant, Marty Bird, played by Jason Bateman and his wife, Wendy, played by Laura Linney. The backstory is that ten years prior, Marty, who is a brilliant accountant along with his wife who is a brilliant political consultant, were heavily recruited and finally seduced into becoming book-keepers for the Mexican Drug cartel.

Marty knows who he's dealing with and keeps impeccable accounts. However, much of the money that he and his firm are working with is cash. Unbeknownst to Marty, his partner has been skimming some of that off the top as the truckloads of cash would roll in. Their boss comes calling, confronts them, and being part of the cartel, eventually kills everyone in the firm but Marty.

However, Marty manages to talk his way out of being killed by coming up with a crazy story, based on a pamphlet he saw only hours before about real estate around the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. He holds up the pamphlet and tells the Drug Lord that he can launder way larger shipments of cash by moving from Chicago to the Ozarks and buying property there and running the money through lakeside businesses.

The Drug Czar calls his bluff and tells Marty that he will spare his life if he can prove it by withdrawing all the cash that now belongs to his firm and laundering *that* so that within a month the drug Lord can go to a legitimate bank of his own and draw out that same money that will then be his and completely clean. That will pay off his partner's debt and Marty and family's life will be spared.

The subsequent two seasons of the show are how Marty and his wife, along with their two children, brilliantly, valiantly, courageously, and shrewdly do exactly that and more. Marty and Wendy not only save their lives and the lives of their *children*, they impress the highest echelons of the cartel. They have earned the cartel's trust to the point where the cartel is now ready to pull out of Missouri, stop scrutinizing them and leave them to completely run things for them in the U.S.

This is what Marty has been waiting for. Finally, now is their chance. Everything they have done has been so they could get out from underneath the cartel long enough to disappear with the smallest chance that anyone would come looking for them. Marty and Wendy have made millions for the Cartel and now have set them up to make millions more.

So Marty has makes plans to leave the operation in the hands of a local felon that has now earned *his* trust and move his family secretly to the Gold coast of Australia. Everything is set. They are dedicating the groundbreaking a new Casino, the cartel will be off their backs, and then they will be free to run.

But Wendy realizes something. They have earned a seat at the table of the largest, most powerful drug cartel in the world. To test it, there has been a man along the way who kidnapped their son

and poses a continued threat to people Wendy now cares about. She lets the cartel know that this man is a danger to their operation. The cartel then promptly has him assassinated. Wendy is suddenly intoxicated with her new-found power.

So, instead of getting the heck out there, she comes to Marty and says, “Marty, I have asked you our whole married life, for once to do something based on being vulnerable and showing emotion. Getting us out of the country to safety is now you finally doing that. But now, I realize something. You were right all along. Now is not the time to be emotional. Now is the time to be rational.”

And here is the line that causes the whole show for me to turn on a dime:

She says, “Isn’t it better to be *holding* the gun, than to be running under it? We have earned the right to hold the gun. We don’t have to run any more. I am not leaving. Our family is not leaving – and neither are you.”

So the decision is made. All the terrible stuff they have done to get away from ever doing that kind of thing again has given Wendy a taste for it. She has convinced herself and Marty that the safest place to be now is where they already are – in bed with the Cartel.

And then, as if to cast judgement on that statement, the director cuts from that scene to that of their offices. It’s quiet and empty as the camera pans the offices. And then suddenly the whole place explodes by a bomb. With that, the season comes to an end.

It will be unfortunate if that is not the *series* end as well. Because that last scene for me could not be any more powerful or prophetic. Before that fateful decision by Wendy, there had been hope – hope that their souls could be saved. But now, as Jesus says, it would be better if a great millstone was tied around their necks and they were thrown into the sea.

Whatever decency, love, or genuine connection they had ever had as husband and wife, mother and father disappeared with their decision to “*hold the gun rather than run under it.*”

You don’t have to be unwilling employees of a drug cartel to feel like you are running under the gun. In the culture we live in we are often made to feel that way. But the answer is not to work your way into holding the gun. In fact, we get into big trouble when we define the world solely as a place that is made up of the *powerful* and the *powerless*.

Jesus saw things differently; he saw a world led by the power-principle in need of being transformed into a world led by the principles of love. Hence our actions and our perceptions are either life-giving or life-draining, either soul-enhancing or soul-killing – either flavor-giving or *flavorless*. As disciples, we are to be less concerned with power and saving our own skin and more concerned with that which gives or adds to life – that which makes it more meaningful and more worth living. Jesus called it “being salty.”

Marty and Wendy started out salty – by every account, they were loving, forgiving, spouses. They were also, attentive, thoughtful, savvy, parents. They began, in other words, being very

salty. But constantly running under the gun, and now especially, *holding* the gun has caused them to lose that saltiness. From now on, they will not be adding flavor to anyone's life.

Christ calls us to make our salt pure. Our tenderness, our compassion, our humanity, our vulnerability – it all must see the light of day. Otherwise our connections are weak, and our life focused primarily on preservation of what we already have and expanding *that* only to suit the self we already know.

How about you? Where and how are you being salty? Where are you regularly tender? Where in life do you *encourage* tenderness? Where do you give yourself away? Where do you encourage others to do that for God's sake? For Christ's sake? Where are you regularly vulnerable? Where do you get to encourage and shore up that vulnerability – to be tender – to be raw, to be human and let God be God? That is where life is savored –the place where life becomes salty and delicious.

Let us pray. Loving God, make us thoughtful, make us tender, make us loving, make us savvy about sin but willing to risk ourselves with other sinners, make us willing to sacrifice and surrender self for your sake. In other words, Lord make us worth our salt to you. Make us salty for your kingdom.

And now bless these gifts that they may help us others also savor the life you give. We pray in Christ's name, amen.