

Numbers (in red) throughout the text are indicators of Powerpoint slides. Here's the [Google link](#) to the PP.

Mark 9: 38-50

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.'

POWERPOINT STARTED...

Neuroscientists tell us that our brains are constantly categorizing what we see into 3 basic categories - good, bad, indifferent. Good translates to safe, bad as a threat, indifferent - meh.

When I think about my everyday life, every once in a while I actually notice that automatic and quick as can be sorting my brain does.

Boom - most of the time, we don't even know we're doing it.

Is it good or bad, or not something I need to even notice?

(#2) In my little kingdom, my backyard? This? (#3) Bad. Threat. They destroy baby trees and dig up my flowers (#4). Rabbit? Squirrel - the Enemy.

Out on the trail? My biggest threats aren't these (#5) - thankfully, I haven't seen any while hiking lately. No, I see these (#6,7) and my brain starts flashing BE CAREFUL! Pay attention! Stumbling on the trail is really one of my biggest threats.

As I scan my yard, when I see something that is a threat my brain notices, but it also notices good things - like when I see this (#8). Ah, pleasure has just arrived...

And then there are all the neutral things that get lumped into the 'indifferent' category.

We all do it - part of our survival, really. We learn from the time we're preschoolers to put faces, sounds, tastes, into categories - do they help me, make me happy and feel safe (#9)? Or might they hurt or threaten me? (#10)

Whatever enters our world - we, without even thinking about it, stick a label on it. (#11)

And, the more stressful our environment, the more quickly we evaluate, the more we put up walls of protection, the less curious we become - we look for the threat, and label it as 'the other'.

(#12)

Yesterday, when hiking alone on a remote trail early in the morning - I saw a man, also alone, coming towards me. My immediate response? Wariness - my brain automatically starts trying to pull up the map - where are the nearest exits to the woods - inviting and comforting just a moment before, now, just maybe, an escape plan is needed... it happens so quickly, and when I see it - the fear, planning, making the stranger into a threat, I'm shocked.

And so it was with the disciples.

Before we get into our text though, let's step back and look at the context in which Mark's gospel was written -

This first gospel was likely written around 70 AD. A time of chaos, disappointment and danger for the Jews. It's in this time period that in response to a Jewish revolt, the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the temple - that central place of religious and cultural life. When Mark wrote this gospel, Judaism was literally fighting for its life. Threats were high, and so was the reaction and ways of dealing with the chaos, which led to an extreme degree of polarization - even among the Jews.

This tension and polarization was present both in Jesus' time and the decades following.

Within Judaism, there were the Essenes, who felt that a faithful following of God required a total withdrawal from society; the Sadducees, who collaborated with the Romans; and those who fought those same Romans - the zealots.

And let's not forget those trying to live a pure life - the Pharisees.

Polarization, factions forming around identity. Sounds familiar?  
The ins and the outs. Threats all around.

It's here, in this land occupied by the powerful, that Jesus lived and taught a new way.

It's here that we hear the Disciples telling Jesus - 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'

Hey, Jesus, just want you to know: There's this guy who isn't one of us, isn't following *us*. Doesn't belong in our tribe. Even though he was doing work in the name of Jesus, he wasn't following *them*.

Did the disciples see this person and immediately label him as 'threat' - and so, out of some sense of fear and desire to protect, try to stop him? Keep their group on message, unified, with clear boundaries?

Sounds pretty reasonable.

But here we are in the middle of this gospel, where Jesus has been teaching his closest followers over and over that suffering is coming. Discipleship and his teachings are not about being safe and secure. Jesus continues to push the bounds of what it means to follow him.

Jesus knows the threats, the danger, the chaos that awaits, and yet he doesn't build walls. He breaks them down.

Jesus says no, don't stop him. Anyone who's not against us is for us.

Jesus seems to be saying: in this time of stress and polarization, we're not looking for enemies to out compete, we're looking for allies.

*We're building a movement, not a club.*

Then come harsh words of J, where

He uses hyperbole here to make his point. This over the top language is a way of saying - you - PAY ATTENTION! Listen!

'Don't you dare put a stumbling block in front of one of these little ones' who believe in me. In front of someone who's trying to do right, especially the marginalized.

Don't you criticize them, don't make things harder for them, don't try and trip them up, don't get in their way. They're your allies, not your enemies.

They, the one you label as 'the other', are not the real threat.

The Greek word that's translated here as 'a stumbling block', (#13) or causing to stumble, is used 4 times in our text. Skandalizó (skan-dal-id'-zo), - really translates as: to set a snare, or set a trap, for catching an animal.

Don't set a trap for another - don't cause one of these marginalized ones, the little ones, to lose their way. The consequences are dire when you do that.

(#14)

And then Jesus shifts the focus, not onto causing someone else to get tripped up, but turns it towards the disciples themselves.

He says: if your *own* hand, your *own* foot, your *own* eye causes you to stumble - if something inside of you makes you lose your footing, makes you lose sight of me - cut it off. Cut it out.

Your real enemy is not over there, the real enemy is inside of you.

Your hand, that place of action, of power, strength, skill, that can so easily abuse - watch out.

Your foot - what motivates you, drives you, takes you places. - is it leading you to harm?

Your eye - your outlook, your assumptions, your world view - how is your automatic way of creating the 'other' keeping you from seeing everyone as a child of God, worthy of love and respect?

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(#15) Squirrels...walnuts, even rattlers... threats, yes, but today - for many of us here in the US, this -

(#16) This feels like the threat of our time.<sup>1</sup>

(#17)

In a recent podcast that Ben did with David Brubaker, a sociologist from Eastern Mennonite University, they talked about the polarization of our current reality, our own 'us and them' time.<sup>2</sup>

Brubaker looks to Jesus as the model of what it means to remain 'self defined' - knowing what you believe in, staying centered in God, advocating for those beliefs, AND staying connected with those perceived as the 'other'.

Brubaker calls this 'Middle space wisdom', where Jesus had enormous compassion for people, especially those lost, AND, and he held leaders accountable when they were abusing the trust of the people.

In Jesus' model, using positions of power to harm rather than help/empower others is unacceptable. That's the part of ourselves, and of others, that needs to be cut off.

For many of us, staying centered in Christ, advocating for our beliefs while also seeing everyone, every one as a beloved child of God - that's our work. We are not jury and judge.

Our gospel today is reminding us:

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<sup>1</sup> Picture from <https://theconversation.com/what-to-do-with-anti-maskers-punishment-has-its-place-but-can-also-entrench-resistance-143456>

<sup>2</sup> [9/13/21 -ing Podcast. "What Now? Episode 3 "Sustaining" with David Brubaker](#)

Your greatest enemy is not that guy over there, the one you think is your rival. Your greatest enemy is inside you. In Matthew's gospel (7:5) we're told: 'Don't take the splinter out of your neighbors eye...focus on the huge log in your own eye'.

You, focus on your own issues, that's where you should begin. Your real enemy is that part of you that wants to make the other simply into an issue.

Make them wrong, you right, them bad, you good; them outside, you inside, them - not a beloved child, but the enemy..

Yesterday, on the trail, as I got closer to that potential threat - the other - We said a brief hello, and when he'd just passed, he said 'do you know where this trail leads?' I turned, took him in as a person who might be lost - then, then I noticed he was carrying a travel mug and munching on a pack of PB crackers. Maybe just like me, a fellow traveler. I offered to show him a map - not 5 minutes later, a bit of banter about the trail, we were both on our way again. Something had shifted in me. I no longer saw him as a threat, but as Another child of God on his way. JUST LIKE ME

Masks, vaccinations... threats, yes, in some ways. But more importantly, each and every person behind those choices is a beloved. Yes BELOVED child of God. Known and loved.

While some may need to be held accountable for spreading mis-information. Our work, and yes, it feels like work at times, is to hold the center.

To hold Christ's "middle space wisdom" where we define what's safe and also take great care to not cause stumbling blocks. To cut out those places in ourselves that create inner and outer harm.

It's challenging work, this middle space wisdom. Part of what it means for us to be followers of the One who suffered.

I end with a poem that I sent out in mid-week sharing, by Lutheran pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes<sup>3</sup>.

### Cut it Off

**(#18)**

The hand that causes you to stumble  
is not at the end of your arm. It's deeper than that.

What is the hand in you  
that reaches for what is not yours? Cut it off.  
There is nothing you need to grasp.

**(#19)**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unfoldinglight.net> Steve Garnaas-Holmes 9/23/21

What is the eye in you that does not look with love?  
Pluck it out. The eyes of love are good enough.

What are the feet in you that that won't trust,  
that lead you away from the path of love?  
Cut them off. You don't need to go there.

(#20)

Does it sound harsh? Don't worry,  
they're not part of the real you.  
Besides, they'll grow back.

The Teacher is not asking you to maim yourself.  
He is inviting you to name what interferes,  
and to take away its power.  
He's leading us out of the unquenchable fire  
of our fears, desires and attachments.

(#21)

Without our grasping, fearful, compulsive parts,  
perhaps then we will rely more  
on the eyes and hands and feet of Jesus.

This pruning is how we become whole.

(#22)

#### **Additional Resources used:**

Clifton Black from Princeton Theological seminary  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50>

Brian McLaren - [B44: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B \(2015\)](#)