

## Cut Off, or Folded In?

**Mark 9: 38-50**

**September 29, 2024, Home Moravian Church**

Earlier that day, the disciples had “argued who was the greatest.”

When you enter a conversation—or a Bible text—it’s always helpful to know what was going on just before you came in. So let’s look back at what Jesus and the disciples were doing before the conversation in today’s text.

That would be last week’s reading, when a man had brought his demon-possessed son in hope of an exorcism, but the disciples couldn’t get the job done. Jesus successfully exorcised the demon, and then he and the disciples walked on through Galilee. During the walk, Jesus again predicted his betrayal, death, and resurrection, but the disciples didn’t understand and were afraid to ask him to explain. So they went about something they *did* understand: jostling for position.

As they rested later in Capernaum, Jesus asked the disciples: “What were you arguing about along the way?” *But they were silent*, says Mark, *for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest*. This is where Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” To emphasize his point, he took into his arms a child—the most vulnerable and powerless human in that society—and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

And yet. Even so. Even after hearing Jesus predict his own humiliation, followed by his explicit instructions to throw aside their desire for greatness and to live in complete humility and vulnerability... even then, John’s next move—this is today’s text—is to complain that someone

not in their group was trying to cast out demons. “We tried to stop him,” says John, “because he was not following us.” John, for one, is ready to cut that guy out. Cut him off.

That hardly sounds like an act of humility—which Jesus is quick to point out, by emphasizing the broad embrace of their ministry. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Anyone who does even the smallest kindness to someone bearing Jesus’ name will themselves be folded into that embrace. There is no need to cut him off.

But then, Jesus goes on.

On one thing, Jesus is really clear: It is a terrible sin to be the cause of another’s stumbling. He casts this warning into the framework he’s just established: New believers are like little children—vulnerable, and just learning to walk. Their footing is uncertain. And if “any of you”—the disciples—causes one of these toddling servants to lose their footing on their way to God, it would be better for that disciple to be thrown into the ocean with a giant stone around his neck. Because drowning, in this estimation, is not the worst way to die.

Surely much worse would be the torments of worm and flame—and here, I’ll say, it’s way too easy to get distracted by the images. Over centuries, creative Christian writers’ minds may have spent more time trying to picture what hell is like than they have spent reflecting on the spiritual problem of this text, which is the capacity of even Jesus’ own disciples to put stumbling blocks in someone’s path to God. Better such a disciple be drowned! Better the vulnerable believer be saved by cutting that disciple off the body. What is hell really like? It’s like being cut off from the body.

If your hand, or your foot, or your eye causes you to sin, cut it off, says Jesus; tear it out. Remove it from the body.

I have always read these words of Jesus as addressed to us as individuals with our personal sins, the stumbling blocks we create for ourselves and drag around with us: our addictions, our compulsions, our ridiculously bad choices. All of us have things we'd like to cut out of our past, or our present. All of us, on deep reflection, could admit that going through life with one hand or foot or eye hacked off in our own remorse might be a good trade for the pain of going through life bearing our heaviest sins. All of this is true. All reflection on our sins, and every turn to repentance, is much to be desired.

And.

This week I am noticing the context of Jesus' words. When he talks about cutting parts out of the body, he has just *explicitly* warned his disciples not to be the cause of another's stumbling. His *own disciples*...who have not only been arguing with each other about greatness, but are now seeking to exclude a possibly humble servant who isn't part of their group—and who, not coincidentally, is casting out demons, a task at which they have just publicly failed. Are they trying to prove their greatness because, secretly, they are worried about their worth? What if Jesus' disciples, in this anxiety, model a behavior that the new believer adopts? What if Jesus' disciples, having pumped themselves up with pride, turn a humble new believer into a seeker after greatness, causing him to sin? Then is the prescription for this believer's healing to *cut them off his body*?

I am thinking now about the body of Christ: we family of believers toddling along our paths to God. And even as the body toddles along, how many different ideas exist within the body of what the path looks like, and how to walk it, and who belongs in it. *Lord, we saw someone doing work in your name who wasn't part of our group. Who looked different from our group. Should we stop them?*

Christianity looks different all around the world because everywhere Christianity travels, it changes. It changes in its music, its art, its preaching. Stories, images, songs—these are cultural responses to the gospel, and they must grow out of a culture to be effective within the culture.

Cultural differences in Christianity exist not only from country to country, but from congregation to congregation. A lot of those differences are clearly incidental. Seventeen years ago, when I came to Winston-Salem to attend divinity school, Bill and I went looking for a church to join. One Sunday morning, I walked into a sanctuary and saw a full drum kit up in front of the choir loft. Right away, I wondered how soon I could leave. Because the *musical* culture of a congregation is important to me in my worship life. But I serve the body of Christ badly if I decide that having a drum kit in the sanctuary is the wrong way to be Christian. And if I were to proclaim as much to the body, I think I'd deserve to be cut off.

I know that's silly. We may always be beginners in seeking God, but I hope we are all mature enough not to go around declaring that having drum kits in worship is the wrong way to be Christian. But when differences in the body of Christ go deeper—when conflicts arise over doctrine, over actions, over scriptural interpretation—we might dig more deeply into our preferred positions. Because when the path to God gets confusing, certainty makes us feel more secure in our footing. And once we get too certain, we might even hear ourselves talking like John in today's story. *Lord, we saw someone doing work in your name who wasn't part of our group. So we tried to stop them.*

Had John not taken Jesus' correction, would he have continued pumping up his pride? Would he have gone through Galilee arguing for the greatness of his group, the grandness of

their station? Certain of his own righteousness, might he have become a stoker of division, a stumbling block in someone else's path to God?

Should he then have been cut off?

We can all be tempted, like those first disciples, to pride and the quest for greatness. Sometimes that's because we're worried about our own inadequacies. Sometimes, though, it can happen because we just love something so much that we get too proud of it. We love our religious convictions and our particular way of doing Christianity. But our love for what we do must never lead us to reject someone who's doing Christianity in a way that challenges our certainty. We must never decide that we have a lock on the right way. Because too much certainty stokes division, and when people on the path to God see division in the church, that's a stumbling block for them. They might just quit the path. And we know, from today's text, what ought to happen to those who cause new believers to stumble. We don't want to be the hand, or foot, or eye that deserves to be cut off, torn out.

But, as every Christian gratefully knows, there is a difference between what we deserve and what Jesus offers. After all, Jesus's ministry brought in the ones who had been cut off. Jesus was all about restoring the body to wholeness.

Like most everyone else, I guess, I carry sins that I wish I didn't. One day, years ago in my chaplaincy training, I told my supervisor that I wished I could just get rid of whatever part of myself it was that had led me into regrettable decisions. I said I wished I could just *burn it out*. And my supervisor, with all his years of theological and pastoral training, from his apparently bottomless well of compassion and grace, responded that, rather than wishing I could cut off that part of myself, perhaps I should put my arm around that part of myself.

*Put my arm around it.* Figure out what that foolish, uncertain, proud, worried part of me really needed, and treat it with the same compassion I would offer any patient I met in the hospital. Listen to it. Even love it. With my arm around it. What a concept. What liberation!

And what was Jesus doing, just before we walked in? He was putting his arms around a child: a sometimes foolish, sometimes selfish, sometimes proud, likely often worried child. He put his arms around it, and welcomed it.

Just a moment later, we enter the room: and what we see is Jesus, with his wise and compassionate counsel, putting his arms around John. *It's okay, he is saying. Don't worry. Release your pride. There is room for everyone on the path to God.*

Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, recently wrote that for a ministry to be truly inclusive, “it’s important to let people change their minds without being humiliated.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever John might deserve, Jesus doesn’t insist that he suffer the humiliation of being cut off from the body. Instead, Jesus puts his arms around him.

Our nation is in a time of deep division, heartbreaking division, fueled by anxiety and pumped up with pride, constantly arguing about who is the greatest. The church needs to be the place where we release all that, a place where everyone can be humble and vulnerable because everyone feels safe. Whatever you or I or anyone else deserves, we are grateful for what Jesus offers. Jesus puts his arms around whatever foolish, uncertain, proud, worried part of us has become our own stumbling block, and he folds us all into the broad and grace-filled embrace of his ministry. What a concept! What liberation. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> “What Does It Mean to Be an Inclusive Church?” *The Christian Century*, July 2024, p. 35.