



Sermon, February 4, 2018
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“New Society”

Scripture: Mark 9:33-50

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone ^a casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ 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.

⁴² “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, ^b it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ 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, ^c to the unquenchable fire. ^d ⁴⁵ 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. ^e ⁴⁷ 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, ^f ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ^g ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? ^h Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Turning Tables

In 1978, I went to England for a semester of study abroad during my college years. While there, several of us took a tour to Stratford upon Avon where we toured various houses or points of interest concerned with Shakespeare or his time. At one house that was set up to look like a house of Shakespeare’s era, the tour guide explained to us the origins of various common expressions in English. One set of expressions had to do with the table at which the family ate and presumably did other things as well. For most people who had very little money, the table consisted simply of a board set up on some sort of supports. Chairs were a rarity, so usually the family stood around the board. If there was a chair,

usually the father sat at it, as in a place of authority, and after a while the person seated in a place of authority came to be referred to as the “chairman of the board.” Perhaps you have sung that grace, “Evening has come/the board is spread./Thanks be to God / who gives us bread”? The board being spread alludes to this earlier reference to a board. After several months of usage, the board would become quite dirty and full of crumbs, so the board would be turned over and the bottom side of the board would then become the top side, and was the preferred side until it, too, was dirty or cut-up. This gave rise to the expression of “the tables being turned,” which came to refer to any reversal of fortune or circumstances.

The spirituality that Jesus demonstrates to his followers was a table-turning spirituality. It seems as though he was continually challenging the presumptions of his disciples concerning the order of things they took for granted, which they construed as “God’s plan for things.” These stories we’ve been reading these past few weeks in Mark depict this propensity of Jesus to turn the tables and establish a new way of living, relating and thinking. This morning, I want to talk about how Jesus perforated perimeters and toppled top-downs.

Toppled the Top-Downs

The first thing Jesus does in today’s reading is to topple the top-down thinking of his followers. We all recognize this thinking today, because we still practice it. It’s the sort of thinking that sets up ranking scales for everything, and is reflected in business practices that award huge salaries and bonuses and percs for chief executive officers provided they do things that make the company huge profits, instead of rewarding the hard work put in by employees on the factory floor or behind the counters in stores and shops.

What is interesting about the story of the disciples’ arguments about who was the greatest, is that Jesus has to repeat it over and over. In just one chapter later, Chapter 10, James and John come to Jesus and ask to sit at his right and left hand when he comes into his power. You can almost hear Jesus slapping his forehead. He calls them together and scolds them

all, saying, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:35-45).

Jesus specifically identifies what he understands his life-mission to be: to serve and to give his life as a ransom. To *serve* and to *give*. In a nutshell, this describes the spirituality of Jesus. But Jesus describes it himself in direct contrast to the lines of power, privilege, domination and control as found in the world.

Jesus flat-out rejects how power is used in human affairs to control, dominate and oppress other people. What Jesus does is basically to say this: "You are familiar with how political power is wielded in our world. You have experienced it used against you. You have seen how it oppresses and hurts and destroys. That is the opposite of what I am about. The power you have experienced presses people down. I have come to raise them up. The power you have experienced captures and enslaves people. I have come to ransom and set people free. The power you have experienced has been used by those in power for their own personal benefit. I have come that others may benefit from me."

Perforated Perimeters

The next thing Jesus does is to perforate the perceived perimeters that people put up. (How do you like that alliteration? I just couldn't resist.) the disciples imagine this official periphery around them that is posted with signs saying "Us," and "Them" to everybody outside of the circle. When they encounter somebody else casting out demons in Jesus' name, they tell them to stop. Why? It must be because they think they have a copyright to Jesus' name, or a patent, perhaps. Jesus cuts through that kind of thinking. He perforates the periphery. If he has come for the benefit of all people, then there is no longer us versus them, no longer you against me.

New Community to Contain New Wine

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This all requires a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, a literal change of our minds. Instead of asking, “How will this action get me ahead in the world or raise me up a notch,” we ask ourselves, “How does this action serve others and help them get ahead, raise them up a notch, or provide for their welfare?” In the sphere of politics consider how the tone might instantly change from the triumphalist, no-holds-barred, winner-take-all, battle-front atmosphere of national politics to one that is based upon serious consideration of how to serve the lowest economic sectors of society. Or consider how differently business might be done if the bottom line of a company was not amassing profits for shareholders and exorbitant salaries for upper echelon executives, but how profits might be used not only to develop new products that actually served the needs of persons, but also were used to provide needed services to under-privileged communities?

Of course, stating it in this fashion immediately raises objections to the pie-in-the-sky idealism of all of this. That is precisely the point. What Jesus expected of these male followers was a radical and definitive break from “business as usual,” in fact, from life as usual. The fact that Jesus chose people from different social and economic strata of society, brought them all together, and then expected them not only to get along but to act in ways that are not only completely different but also opposite from their conventional assumptions indicates the nature of his spiritual enterprise.

As each disciple left their accustomed life situation and gathered around Jesus, this new liminal state left the threads of hierarchy, power and domination unstitched and free. Whenever the old ways of knitting relationships showed up, he promptly unraveled the presumptions and taught a new set of knots. What Jesus was doing was to weave a new way of being, and a new community out of entirely new cloth.

Significantly, Jesus did not set up a new hierarchy. Even when he says, “the last shall be first and the first last,” this is qualified by his saying, “you shall not lord it over others.” The idea of “being on top” is replaced with the ideal of serving others and contributing to their welfare. When the enculturated impulse to elevate oneself is replaced with the impulse to

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serve the needs of others, not as an imposition of a new hierarchy but as a freely chosen way of relating and being, a new form of freedom is at work. This freedom requires an act of will, and a conscious rearrangement of priorities, expectations and relationships.

In order to make this effective, however, requires living in community. The changes Jesus enacted were not done in isolation from a lived community. One of the spiritual practices Jesus engaged in was the formation of a new form of community. In this new community, his followers were to establish new ways of relating. Rank had no place. Economic privilege had no place. Jesus spoke with women in public, and welcomed them as disciples. Luke even indicates that several women followed Jesus and provided for him and the entire group of disciples—women and men— “out of their own means” (Luke 8:3).

As we endeavor to Tend this Path that Jesus has given us, we need to seek out the support of other people who are dedicated to this same path. It is not enough to gather with other folk who are well-ensconced in the hierarchies and ways of relating of our society. Instead, it will be necessary to gather with men and women who are dedicated to this new way of being in Jesus.

From here, we live in society as yeast, infusing the whole loaf with a new vision of the world. Like yeast, living according to this new vision, we can help the world around us rise to new heights. Like salt, we can flavor the whole loaf. But we must remain true to the path that Jesus has given us, or we will no longer be as salt. This is the vital importance of Tending the Path: if the world is not a better place for our presence in it, then we are unsalty salt, and unyeasty yeast. It just may be time to turn some tables again.