

**Sermon: Following Jesus**  
**Reverend Lisa Eleck**  
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**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 9: 38-50

Another Exorcist

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.

Temptations to Sin

'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.'

## **SERMON: Following Jesus**

I'm not sure the disciples got it. I 'm not sure they understood Jesus' message about service from last week's reading. As you recall the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest. And Jesus told them that to be first, one had to be last, serving others. Jesus didn't want any part of their squabbling over who was the greatest; their competition between themselves.

But no sooner had Jesus explained the need to serve and the need to welcome a child in order to welcome him, than John, one of the disciples, complained that someone outside their group was casting out demons. And because this person was not "following us," they tried to make him stop. Or in other words, because this person who was casting out demons in Jesus' name was not a part of Jesus' select friends, they wanted him to stop. The disciples were not impressed that this person was healing people. They were only concerned that this person was not "following us," was not part of Jesus' inner circle.

Somehow, Jesus was not concerned that the person casting out demons was not one of the twelve. Actually Jesus was just fine with this person healing in his name. He told his friends, '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. "

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand what it meant to follow him. Earlier he had told them that being great meant serving others. Now he is telling them that service to others is more important than being in Jesus' inner circle. Doing works is the key, not belonging to Jesus' inner circle or to the right group. In fact, Jesus goes on to say that if a person is not against Jesus, that person is for Jesus. The work that the person is doing is what's important.

As a visiting nurse, especially as a hospice visiting nurse, I went into homes of diverse individuals of different faith traditions. When we shared stories around our faith, my visits were more meaningful to me. And my patients taught me a lot.

I recall one gentleman, a very religious Christian man. He was not concerned about dying. His biggest concern was that he did not want his family to suffer by watching him suffer. Now, this man had the most beat up Bible I had ever seen. The cover was tattered, the corners kind of folded in, some pages barely held to the binding. But his man did not abuse his Bible. He had spent a life time reading it. And my final memory of him was of him peacefully in bed with his family sitting in the room and hymns playing in the background.

This man's worn Bible was remarkable to me as my Catholic tradition did not stress reading the Bible. It put more emphasis on particular prayers, religious practices, and attendance at church on Sunday and Holy Days where we would hear the priest explain scripture to us.

Another of my patients was a Baptist Deacon. His son and daughter were both Baptist pastors. Whenever I visited, they would pray together at some point. After a short time, I was invited to join – all of us standing in a circle and holding hands. At the time, I did not know that Baptist prayer is very enthusiastic. Well it was! Words of thanks and praise by the leader of the prayer would be followed by spontaneous “Amen” and “Alleluia” by those who were in the circle. I had not prayed like that before. Then I was asked if I wanted to lead the prayer. I was a little hesitant at first because my prayer was more quiet in nature. But I gave it my best shot and low and behold, I heard “Amen” and “Alleluia.” And I looked forward to our prayer time every visit.

Another family I visited was Pentecostal, a very faith-filled family that was seriously hoping for a miracle. And during one of my visits, ladies from the church arrived. They prayed in tongues over my young patient. I did not stay long, quietly excusing myself. To me the prayer was loud and I could not understand any of it because the prayers did not involve words – but the outpouring of the Spirit. My challenge during my visits was to describe the changes I saw that indicated my patient was not improving, yet not dashing their hopes for the Spirit to work a miracle. On my visit to the family after my patient died, the matriarch of the family thanked me – not for nursing stuff but for allowing them their faith.

Over the years, there has been contention between different Christian denominations and their differences in dogma and who is right, how to follow Jesus. Maybe our churches had missed Jesus' words, '... 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.' Fortunately, we see more cooperation between churches as we are working together as partners trying to serve the vulnerable in our midst. And we are participating in ecumenical worship. It's slow but it's happening.

I have one more patient story to share with you, a woman with cancer who lived alone but whose son was moving in to stay with her as she was approaching death. My patient was a lovely woman, at peace and accepting of her approaching death. The first thing I recall about my visits to her was her home. There was something different about it, something I don't recall from other houses. There was an aura of serenity when I entered – passing through some gardens and stonework. She and I had some beautiful conversations about Jesus and the Dali Lama, from a book I had read entitled, The Good Heart. You see, she was Buddhist. And this woman told me that I was the first Christian she had met that she had spoken with about faith that had

not tried to convert her. I felt very connected to this woman, as we shared something meaningful and beautiful.

Well, when this woman was declining she needed to be admitted to our program's in-patient hospice unit. Though she did not appear to be imminently dying, I arranged the transportation. Then I followed the ambulance to the hospital, just to see that she got settled. When I arrived the nurse was getting some information from her.

Then I went in to see her. She looked comfortable and at peace. But she told me it was too bright in the room. She asked me to dim the lights. It didn't seem particularly bright to me, but I closed the blinds and turned off the light. I asked her if it helped. She said she guessed and thanked me. She didn't sound very convincing.

I left her room and stood outside the door, speaking with her son and the doctor. Her son went to call family. The nurse returned to finish her assessment. She went into the room and came out almost immediately to tell us that my patient had died. I was surprised because my lady had just asked me to dim the lights. As I thought about that and how the room did not appear particularly bright to me, I wondered if per chance she had seen a different light – a spiritual light that was shining at the end of her life.

Our conversations about faith were rich. We both appreciated the opportunity to share and came to respect our different traditions. Likewise, when I attended Hartford Seminary, and interfaith seminary, I attended worship in a synagogue and a mosque. I was welcomed in both houses of worship. I also appreciated the holy feel of the synagogue and the connection to Jesus' faith. And I appreciated the way the Muslim congregation engaged their whole bodies in prayer and that they stop what they are doing five times a day to pray to Mecca. And both traditions emphasize service.

Jesus lived a life of service, justice and love. He approved of people doing deeds of power – deeds of service, love and justice, even when they were not his close friends. He told his disciples that anyone who welcomed a vulnerable one like the child he had brought to himself, welcomed him and his Father. He told his friends, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” That sounds pretty inclusive if you ask me.

Jesus was inclusive. He healed those who were not Jewish. He healed the daughter of the Syrophonecian woman. He healed the Samaritan leper who returned to thank him when the other nine who were healed did not. And Jesus healed the child of the Roman centurion, who believed Jesus could heal from a distance simply by saying so. Jesus reached out across that which divided the people of his day - faith and politics. His love was for all people. Jesus’ love was inclusive and radical. It’s what Jesus expected of his followers.

And it’s in keeping with the words of Moses. In the book of Numbers, the people are complaining that they have only manna, bread, and no meat. Moses was fed up and went to the Lord. The Lord had Moses choose 70 elders to be his helpers. Those elders, except for two, Eldad and Medad went out to the tent of the Lord and received his spirit. Then the elders prophesied.

Well the two who had not gone out to the tent had also received the spirit and began to prophesy. We hear that “ ‘Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!’ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!” (Numbers 11: 24–29)

“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets...” What if all God’s children were prophets, speaking God’s truth to power; the truth of

love, justice, mercy, and forgiveness? What if all God's children— all people - followed the way of Jesus, the way of service and extravagant love for one another? What if?