

Justice in a Glass of Water – Mark 9: 38-50
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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What I noticed immediately when I walked into this sanctuary for the first time was the similarity of the structure and design of the church building that Nancy and I were married in. That building was the church she grew-up in, and both of us have fond memories of worshiping together there.

Over the years, we have been able to worship there whenever we make occasional visits to see family. It was only a couple years ago when we made one of those visits, and both of us were thrilled to be able to worship in that building. Little did we anticipate the surprise we were about to experience that Sunday morning. We sat in the middle part of the sanctuary in front of the pulpit, and for a processional we were surprised to see a large group of people wearing motor cycle denim and leather jackets - you know, the kind that are cut off at the shoulders. Their colors and club name was on the back of their clothes, and they had many interesting tattoos to look at. We were further surprised when they sat in the pews only a few rows in front of us.

Our next surprise was when the pastor entered. She was also wearing her motorcycle leathers with a beautiful Stoll. I had never seen anything like this, and I was feeling out of place with my coat and tie. As it turned out, this day was a special Sunday of the year. This day was the blessing of the bikes. I thought that I must have missed reading about that day in the lectionary, and felt like I was somewhat out of touch with new church celebration days.

At the end of worship there was a recessional and the pastor walked the center aisle, and immediately behind her were all the men and women bikers. The benediction was outside, and the pastor stopped at each cycle and had a blessing prayer. The highlight was when they all started their bikes at the same time. The pastor jumped on one of the bikes behind a man that I think was her husband, and they roared off into the sunset. It was a remarkable Sunday. One to remember, and it did give me some new ideas.

For those of you who are a bit tense at this moment, you can relax, because I have no plans for doing such a worship service. However, what that day did get me to

wondering about was how many of those bikers had any other contact or connection with the Church? Could this have been the only time the Church reached out to them?

Though I cannot imagine myself standing in the pulpit dressed in motorcycle leathers, it was really kind of bold of that pastor to attempt to reach the unreachable. I did not feel comfortable with what she was doing, and I suspect most of the other coat-and-tie people of that congregation didn't feel comfortable either. I know that she left that position shortly after, and I find myself wondering how much her unorthodox reaching out to the unreachable had anything to do with her leaving?

Jesus and his disciples were in Capernaum, and apparently Jesus was attending to the important matters as he did in every other place we passed through, things like healing, feeding, teaching and bringing the dead back to life. That is pretty big stuff, and not even the disciples were good at doing any of those important works, but someone else was doing them. Someone else who neither the disciples nor Jesus ever met or knew. They never even heard of him. Nevertheless, there is some fella who is out there in the streets of Capernaum doing the equivalent of blessing motorcycles. Their finer theological senses were troubled. Have you ever heard of such a ridiculous thing as blessing the grist mill wheels, the shovels, rakes, and tools of all sorts? How can anything be more ridiculous? It is a mockery of Jesus and everything he does to have that fella out there in the streets doing things that others are snickering at and telling everyone he is doing it in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. The disciples had no choice but to report him to Jesus and hold him accountable for his unauthorized work.

Can you imagine the surprise of the disciples when Jesus said, "leave him alone. If anyone is doing anything good in my name, then I am on that person's side. Even if it is as little as giving a thirsty person a glass of water, that then becomes important and is an affirmation of what I am doing. The difference between doing something as small as giving a person a glass of water and not giving water is the difference between helping and becoming stumbling block."

I have attempted to be faithful to the Gospel by regularly preaching and praying about the big justice issues of the world like hunger, violence, racism, sexism, and others. I have also noticed that those are the times for people to be thinking about something else or doze off, and with good reason. What can any one of us do about any of those big-

ticket justice issues? They are bigger than anything any one of us can do. They are so big that many people shuck them off as “political” issues. “Hey preacher, stop talking about political issues and talk about Jesus.”

Okay, I’ll talk about Jesus. Jesus’ vision was BIG and embraced every sort of suffering and isolation that can be identified, but with what we heard today, he melted it down to where his kind of justice begins. He says it can begin with a glass of water being given to a thirsty person. Any act of kindness is a step toward justice, and that is where you become one of his. He says you are not causing problems when you act out kindness or, in his own words, you are not a “stumbling block.”

It was two summers ago. Where we live there are all new houses. Because of where we live, there are many Mormons. In the house behind our house lives a Mormon family. I think he is a Bishop, which is a significant position in the LDS. The two youngest children were twin 19-year-old girls. One of the girls struggled with health issues from birth. I was fascinated with her because she seemed to break every one of the behavior expectations that is normal in that faith, but her parents seemed to let it happen. One day when I arrived home from work, another Mormon neighbor, a woman, approached me on the run. She told me that the 19 year-old had died the night before. Before I even went in to tell Nancy that I was home, I knocked on the neighbor’s door. These people know I am not a Mormon, and also that I am a pastor. There were others inside, but they cautiously invited me in. The room went silent. I could tell by their look that they wondered what I was going to say, perhaps my own theological bent on death and eternity. I sat, and all I said was that my heart ached for them, and that I understand that nothing can be more painful than losing a child. I sat in quiet with them for a few moments, then excused myself. To my surprise I received a couple of hugs, and the cautious faces now had a half-smile that said “thank-you.” What is more interesting, is that now, whenever we see each other, there are always generously kind words that are shared, in spite of our differences. Perhaps a world of justice and peace begins with something as small as a glass of water.

When Jesus told his disciples to leave the man alone, the one doing works in Jesus’ name, a fair concern to raise is this: “who is in and who is out?”

-I have more stories from my first congregation than I have from any other. At an annual meeting following a wonderful potluck dinner, a congregational discussion developed around the question “are we a welcoming congregation and community to new people?” Nearly everyone voiced words affirming our welcoming nature. It was a woman who came to the community through marriage and had lived there for 45 years who spoke after much discussion, and said: “I have lived in this community and been part of this congregation for 45 years and I am still an outsider.”

I worked in northern Virginia in a non-church position. One of the women who worked in the office was a direct descendent of Robert E. Lee, and was able to show the bloodline connection. During one of my conversations with her she said something that startled me. She said, “anyone can live in Virginia, but not anyone can be a Virginian. Being a ‘Virginian’ is dependent upon bloodlines.”

The disciples were establishing a bloodline. They were building a group of “insiders,” and it was Jesus who said “knock-it-off.” Anyone who follows me or does my work is part of my bloodline, and any rooting out of those people is to betray me.

- We all yearn for a world of peace and justice.
- A world where evil actions are always held accountable.
- A world where there are no hungry people.
- A world where people are not judged by the color of their skin or their sexuality.
- A world where wars and other acts of violence are never tolerated.

So where does “justice” begin? According to what I read in the Gospel today, it begins simply. It begins with acts of kindness. It can begin with something as small as a glass of water. Justice is not something beyond your reach, nor is it political. Justice is the way of Jesus, and it can be as small as a glass of water.

Amen.