



The “And” of Faithfulness

Mark 9:38-50

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In the art of improv, what keeps the audience laughing and the sketch moving is the over-the-top hamming it up of the actors. To keep things moving, the actors must embrace the reality of what is *and* do more. Saying “yes, *and* ...” is vital for the sketch to continue. Anytime someone denies the present situation, or should they refuse or fail to add more to the current story line, the sketch dies out.

One of the best improv shows of television history is *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* I remember watching the original series, back when it was hosted by Drew Carey. There were a number of different sketches during which the actors were invited to make up characters and scenarios on the fly. One of my favorite sketches was when the actors were given props, which had to be used to create characters to further a directed storyline. If, during the creation of the story, an actor could not come up with a line ... if they got stuck in what should come next, even if but for a few seconds, Drew Carey as host would buzz them out of the skit. Their partner in the sketch would step in to pick up where things left off and keep the story going. Without the *yes, and* ..., the sketch died. With hesitation or pause, the storyline came to a screeching halt. To ensure the story didn’t crash and burn, Carey would bring in someone else to keep things moving.

The *yes, and* ... was vital for the success of the sketch and the show.

While we often think of improv as a manufactured environment created on the fly to be funny and entertaining, the concept of *yes, and* ... that makes improv so great is just as important for our daily living. Our ability both to live and to live faithfully is contingent upon our embrace of the practice of *yes, and* ... in life. To start, there is a need for us to accept the reality of what is ... we must say “yes” to the way things are. We are not necessarily saying “yes” in approval or affirmation, but we must say “yes” in acceptance; for if we deny reality, if we reject the existence of what is, the story ends.

Sadly, we are seeing the repercussions of refusing to accept reality across the nation today. I saw a stat this past week that said 1 in every 500 Americans has died in the past 20 months. Over the past year and a half, we’ve lost almost 700,000 US citizens, and over 4.5 million global neighbors. Not all of these deaths are due to Covid, but on the majority, if they weren’t due to Covid itself, they were due to complications Covid caused with other health concerns.

Refusing to accept the reality of what is cuts the story short.

But saying “yes” is not the end. Accepting the reality of what is does not move the story forward. There is a need to offer the *and* ... to move through the current reality of what is to a more faithful future. And hear this, there’s always **another and** to be offered. Until we rejoice in that great company of

heaven, celebrating the full consummation of God's eternal kingdom, there will always be another *and* to offer.

It might seem that offering *and* after *and* after *and* would be hard and complicated. It can be exhausting to continuously create new storylines to move the narrative forward. Even on *Whose Line*, Wayne Brady and Ryan Stiles (as good as they were) got buzzed out from time to time and someone else needed to step in to move the story forward. (Perhaps there's a sermon here about sabbath rest, but that's not the focus for today.)

Offering the *and ...* to move the story of life forward can be hard, but it is built in to our DNA as a people of faith. Finding a way to move through the reality of what *is* is part of our ancient tradition. Offering new life when death seems imminent is the good news of God in Jesus Christ – from the parting of the Red Sea to the empty grave, God always provides an *and* to keep the story going.

Last week, Shani talked about embracing the gift of *and ...* in moving forward in life. The *and* of life is a gift of grace from God that invites us to move forward into each new day, each new hour, even each new breath of life. Today, I want to look at the *and* of faithfulness. How do we, as disciples of God in Jesus Christ, become better disciples by embracing the *and ...* of faithfulness?

Our text today comes from the gospel of Mark. It is something of a comedy sketch in scripture. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. You can likely visualize a sketch taking place where the actor keeps cutting off limb, after limb, after limb, until the result is something of a Monty Python scene, where the actor is jumping on one foot with no arms crying out, "tis merely a scratch!" It's intentionally humorous; it goes to the Nth degree to make its point. But what is the point? What is the Jesus trying to teach us here? Surely we're not *really* supposed to cut off our limbs should they cause us to sin.

This story is found in each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In both Matthew and Luke, this story is offered in response to a question of law, centered around the commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." As recorded in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus is trying to point out that faithfulness is not just about right action, but that instead, faithfulness begins with right intention. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus says, "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Jesus is looking to highlight something deeper than wrongful action ... he's getting to the core of the matter.

In our reading today from Mark's gospel, the story is not offered in response to a question of the law, nor is it given a focus on sexual sin.

In Mark's gospel, the story centers around the disciples' jealousy when someone else has cast out demons in the name of Jesus. Look back to the text, beginning in verse 38:

John – here the spokesman for the 12 disciples – says to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Did you catch the end of his statement? Following who?

Hold on, let’s back up even further for a second:

A few chapters back, in Mark 6:7-13, Jesus gives the disciples authority to cast out demons. It reads, “He gave them authority over unclean spirits. ... and they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” The disciples – the twelve – were given this capability to cast out demons, and they did it – in the name of Jesus they successfully cast out the demons that were possessing people ... that is, until they couldn’t. See, in Mark 9:17-20, a few verses before today’s reading, we find a man comes up to Jesus and says, “My son was seized by a demon, which makes him foam at the mouth and become rigid. I asked your disciples to cast it out, **but they could not.**”

The text doesn’t really tell us what happened; it doesn’t say why the disciples were unable to cast out this demon, but after having been successful in this endeavor previously, they got to a point where they could not cast out this demon.

And then, shortly after having been called out for *not* being able to cast out a demon, we come upon today’s scripture where the disciples are complaining to Jesus that another man was casting out demons ... a man who was not “following us.”

Did you catch it this time?

There problem wasn’t that the man was casting out demons in the name of some other deity ... it was that the man, who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, was not following **them**. He does not belong to the apostolic group of 12, and that bothered them – that someone else would have the capacity to do what they believed Christ had only gifted *them* the power to do – and so they complained to Jesus. “Make him stop,” they said, “for he is not following *us*.”

Jesus responds, “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.”

The disciples are once again making a repetitive failure. Time after time after time, the disciples are seeking to control the work of Christ in the world. We see this issue again and again in the early church, and we are still seeing the problem manifest in the life of the Church today. We – as the Church universal – spend so much time trying to restrict the work of other people, other churches, and other denominations ... and Jesus isn’t vague-booking this response. He says, “stop hindering my work in this world, even if it isn’t being done by you!”

This is Jesus offering the imperative, “say yes.” In this initial response, Jesus says, “accept the reality of my work in the world.” We must embrace the *yes* of what is – and that is that we do not control God,

we do not have a monopoly on Christ's power, and we are not in control of how others experience, encounter, or share God's love in the world.

But for Christ, saying *yes* and acknowledging reality is not sufficient in and of itself. There is an *and* to this imperative, and for as funny as a scene as it creates mentally, it invites a pretty serious response.

Christ goes on, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these 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. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out."

"The language is hyperbolic, vivid and harsh."ⁱ It's a challenging invitation for any to hear, much less those who are seeking to follow faithfully the way of God. These are extreme measures, offered here in Mark as an invitation to ensure one does not receive the condemnation of hell. This is not a soft invitation.

Yet, as the late professor Lamar Williamson Jr. offers, "'Cut it off' is a command to be taken not literally, but seriously."ⁱⁱ In Mark's Gospel, Jesus constantly speaks metaphorically, so we can presume this invitation is not a literal one. But be sure, in as serious a tone as possible Jesus is inviting the disciples to ask themselves – and us today, ourselves – just how committed are you to this work of God in the world?

Jesus wants to know, what's your next step in faithfulness? How far are you willing to go to be faithful as followers of the Lord?

If the first step is accepting that we do not have the corner market on Jesus' love in the world – if we are first invited to see that God can work through others to offer healing and grace into the community – then the next step, the *and* of faithfulness, is to ask, what is keeping us from embracing the expansiveness of God's love? What is keeping us from more fully receiving and sharing God's global grace?

What is keeping us from accepting that others can cast out demons? What is keeping us from engaging in the reconciliatory work of reuniting divisions among the body of Christ? What is keeping us from embracing the call of God upon the LGBTQ community to be ordained pastors in the church? What is keeping us from seeing the face of God in our neighbors, regardless their housing, skin color, immigration status, gender-identity, or socio-economic position?

Jesus says, if anything is keeping you from embracing my love for all people, if anything is keeping you from participating in the expansiveness of my work in the world, if anything is keeping you from sharing in the joy of God's love made manifest through a multitude of persons – then cut it off. Cleave from your being anything that inhibits your ability to embrace the fullness of God's love and work in the world.

Jesus says, *yes*, the man who cast out the demons did so in my name even if he wasn't part of your pack of twelve, *and* I am inviting you to do the same. Jesus says, *yes*, the gospel is more expansive and invitational than you are capable of realizing, *and* I'm still inviting you to receive the gift of grace and new life. Jesus says, *yes*, others – even those you don't like – can share in the glory of God's love, *and* that doesn't keep you from sharing in the glory of God's love.

Friends, this is the challenge of faithfulness. *Yes*, we will not always understand the almighty work of God's love in the world – we may not even always agree with it ... *and* ... God still invites you and me to pursue this call of discipleship, to learn and to grow, to expand and to embrace, to be redeemed and reconciled, that God's created humanity might share in the eternal joy of God's love for all of creation.

May God lead us to embrace the *and* of faithfulness, that we might more fully share in the glory of God's love. Amen.

ⁱ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*