



**October 1, 2006**

Preaching: Pastor Ronni Verboom

Mark 9:38-41

## “Is it ‘Be kind to demons’ week?”

The Bible is full of wild stories that rival anything our modern media offer. Some think it's stuffy and dry and boring. Some translations are awkward, in trying to remain faithful to the original languages. But the Bible is full of tales of suspense, violence, romance, good and evil, tears and laughter. The Bible is actually funny sometimes; it can make me laugh.

Bible stories may be so familiar that we miss the humor. Nobody laughed during today's reading, so you may wonder what on earth I'm talking about. But really, truly, believe me- this story made me laugh the first time I heard it.

Let's go through it together.

A group of disciples had been out and about on their own. Perhaps they were teaching or inviting others to join the group following Jesus. Maybe they were on their way from one place to another- off to buy provisions, or returning to rejoin Jesus. Whatever the case, as they traveled they saw someone, in the disciple John's words, "driving out demons."

John didn't say they saw someone TRYING to cast out demons. He said the man was ACTUALLY DRIVING OUT DEMONS. And when they saw this, John reported, they told him to STOP.

Can you picture it? The disciples rushing over to the healer and the waiting tortured people--- rushing up in a huff, breathless, crying out, "STOP!!!! Wait! Now, you there! You! LEAVE THAT DEMON ALONE!!! YOU JUST LET THAT DEMON BE!!! LET IT STAY WHERE IT IS IN THAT CHILD! QUIT HASSLING THAT DEMON!"

Every time I picture this scene, I end up laughing. It's so ludicrous. Why did they hold the healer back? Was it "be kind to demons" week or something? NO, they told Jesus: "We told the healer to stop, because he is NOT ONE OF US."

What did Jesus do? I imagine him walking over to John, looking straight into his eyes, saying, "John, read my lips: Do. Not. Stop. Him. Demons? Bad. No more demons? Good. We don't want to stop this."

And get this: John said the man was driving out demons IN THE NAME OF JESUS, and they still didn't trust him.

The disciples didn't see that, by stopping this man, they were helping demons. Is it "be kind to demons" week? For Jesus, it never is- never, never, never, never, "be kind to demons" week. But for us, we who are continually tripped up by our sin and brokenness, it often ends up being "be kind to demons" week. Sometimes we, like the disciples, end up protecting demons.

First off, let's briefly consider that word: DEMON. In New Testament times demons were agents of all kinds of evil, ills and suffering. They were regarded as servants of Satan, working against life, hope, health, and goodness. For me, the word "demon" names the forces that oppose God's will. Since God's will is for us to be whole, healed, living abundant lives of loving goodness, any attitude or behavior that is contrary to these things, is "demonic". When I turn away from the direction God is calling me, I am listening to and obeying demons.

The disciples not only stopped a man from casting out demons (probably of illness), they listened to a demon themselves. What was the demon in charge of them that day? The "not one of us" demon.

Do we know this demon? Do we ever listen to it? Of course we do.

We live in neighborhoods where we find people like ourselves. We don't know many people who are "not like us"- not really well. So we don't learn about others' ways, their struggles, their stories. We don't TASTE their experience at all.

When I started seminary, I was in my mid-thirties, married, with four children ranging in age from 7 to 15. I spent most of my time with other "second-career" white women students. I felt most comfortable with them. But as I entered ministry, I began to discover what I'd missed. I have come to know and learn from many colleagues: people older than me, people younger than me, men as well as women, African Americans, Korean clergy, Hispanic clergy.

I had an experience in a seminary class, that helped me to see how blind I had been, how ignorant and insensitive, in my life that had been lived mostly with people just like me.

We were assigned to read “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Immediately some of the black students expressed their dismay and even outrage, because the book, written prior to the Civil War, was full of racist attitudes. The author had written the book to elicit support for the abolition of slavery. But still, she was a product of her times, and her story reveals many arrogant attitudes embraced by the whites of her day.

The professor encouraged the class to just hang in there- to trust her- to go ahead and read the book, so we could discuss it. We found buried, in the messed up attitudes of that era, a vision of the power of the Christian faith, as it was lived out by “Uncle Tom”. We had a lot of heated discussions, but I do think we all felt it was a valuable experience.

In one of our discussions, I shared that I felt a horror reading the book that I never had during earlier readings in school. When I read it as a schoolgirl, I was not yet married, did not have children. There is a scene in the novel where a mother watches the sale of her teen-aged daughters to the highest bidder. I imagined the nightmare of that happening to MY daughters- to see them sold into slavery, which often included sexual servitude as well. I was haunted and horrified, sorrowful, deeply disturbed. One classmate, an African American man, was angered by my confession.

“You’ve known about the horrors of slavery all your life! How can it be that you’re just now understanding these things?” We talked. I shared my remorse. But I had to be honest about myself. And because the story of slavery is not MY story, it’s not about PEOPLE LIKE ME, I had never experienced such a deep awareness of its evil.

We are most comfortable with people most like ourselves. This is an obstacle to our faithfulness to God. And it shows up in our religious life just as much as in other areas of our lives.

I was confirmed in a Methodist church at the age of 11. Our family was only sporadically involved in church. But I still picked up some ideas at that early age, about who is in the “Jesus Club”- and who is maybe NOT.

I had attended Roman Catholic mass with my confirmation class. And it was strange. The service was mostly in Latin. You had to wear a hat if you were a girl. And you got up and kneeled down a lot.

I never went to one, but I heard in my family about “holy roller” services. They sounded scary. People jumped around and shouted things and fell down and rolled around on the ground.

You know what all this sounds like? “Hey, God’s not at work in THOSE places, with THOSE folks. They’re not one of us. They say they claim the name of Jesus, but they’re just weird.”

Friends, 11 & 12 year old young people are not alone in thinking this way. I hear US, today, in THIS church making some of those assumptions. What does Scripture teach us about this?

Jesus tells us to look for fruit. Look for fruit. And don’t be so quick to think, “God wouldn’t be at work through THOSE people, in THAT church, in THAT organization.” Look for fruit. Take ANOTHER look.

What KIND of fruit? Well, Galatians gives us one list, in chapter 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Wherever God’s will is done, where the sick are healed, the blind see, the lame walk- where compassion reigns, where evils of exploitation and slavery are resisted, where the unloved are loved, Jesus is at work. Christ pulls us back, when we struggle with mistrust and suspicion, saying, “DO NOT STOP THIS. THIS IS GOOD. THIS IS MY WILL.”

Just as water can fill many containers of different shapes and sizes, the Spirit of Christ can be present in my places, ways and people.

When you see God at work, get out of the way. Don’t interfere- even if God is working in ways that aren’t your particular style or brand. We are called to learn humility in this matter. We are called to seek Jesus’ guidance, humbling ourselves before him. Don’t be so quick to judge where God is working. Take another look.

A little illustration: (on the bulletin: GODISNOWHERE.)

What does this say? “God is nowhere”???????????

Does it? Or does it say, “God is now here”.

Look again, my friends. God IS now here. God is now here. So be it. Amen.