

Title: What's That You're Carrying?  
Text: Mark 9:38-41  
Date: Sept. 30, 2018

This is now our fourth week in the gospel of Mark. Throughout Mark chapters 8-10, Jesus struggles to turn the disciples' thoughts from human thoughts to God's thoughts, and today is no exception. Having said that, I have to give you a heads up that today I am essentially using this text as a starting point, and will be moving far from the text.

The disciples are essentially asking a question that relates to how broad to draw the circle. To be honest, they were not exactly pushing the boundaries too far. Apparently there were some *other* people who were casting out demons in Jesus' name. On the surface, that does not sound like such a bad thing. After all, we could all do with one less demon in the world. This, however, is not the sticking point. The disciples seemed to be less concerned as to whether or not a person was now free from a demon in their life, and more concerned that this person was not following *their* tightly defined group. That's no small point! They were seemingly less concerned with changed lives, and more concerned with who is in the circle, and who is outside the circle. They were concerned that these other folks were not with "us."

Has that ever been a concern of yours? As I have gotten to know you here, I suspect that for many of you it is less of a concern for you now, than it might have been at some other point in your life.

It is certainly noteworthy that Jesus does not seem as stressed about this as his disciples. He makes a rather broad comment: "**Whoever is not against us is for us.**" That strikes me as fairly expansive. Are we prepared to expand our thinking so?

To move beyond casting out demons in Jesus' name, allow me to reframe the issue. I wonder if any of us have had firmly held beliefs that have in fact prevented us from receiving and celebrating good news.

We know that Jesus has a reputation for being a great storyteller. He is famous for using parables for conveying spiritual truth. Jesus, however, does not stand alone in this regard. Since we are a church that embraces wisdom from all traditions, I wanted to share with you a story from another tradition that I found particularly poignant. I'll read it slowly with the hopes that you will pick up on the many details.

A young widower, who loved his five-year-old son very much, was away on business, and bandits came, burned down his whole village, and took his son away. When the man returned, he saw the ruins, and panicked. He took the charred corpse of a child to be his own child, and he began to pull his hair and beat his chest, crying uncontrollably. He organized a cremation ceremony, collected the ashes and put them in a very beautiful velvet bag. Working, sleeping, eating, he always carried the bag of ashes with him.

One day his *real* son escaped from the robbers and found his way home. He arrived at his father's new cottage at midnight, and knocked at the door. You can imagine at that time, the young father was still carrying the bag of ashes, and crying. He asked, "Who is there?" And the child answered, "It's me, Papa. Open the door, it's your son." In his agitated state of mind the father thought that some mischievous boy was making fun of him, and he shouted at the child to go away, and he continued to cry. The boy knocked again and again, but the father refused to let him in. Some

time passed, and finally the child left. From that time on, father and son never saw one another.

So here is your point to ponder: **"Sometimes, somewhere you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it too much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it."** I find that to be such a profound statement. Let me read it again. **"Sometimes you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it too much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it."**

If we are to remain open to Truth (with a capital "T"), we need to be wary of clinging to truth (with a small "t"). Traditions can have value, but clinging to traditions too tightly can prevent us from seeing the Truth. Creeds and formulations of truth can have value, but clinging too tightly to creeds can prevent us from seeing the Truth. Our images of what God "looks like" may have value (on occasion), but those very images may in fact restrict our receptivity to being bowled over by the presence of the Divine on other occasions. The security that we find in being identified with a faith community that mostly accepts us can be of great comfort, but I daresay that clinging too tightly to any faith community can at times be an obstacle to the Truth.

I cannot answer this question for you, but I ask: "What is in the 'beautiful velvet bag' that you are carrying around your neck?" In the bag is something you cherish, but it just might be a case of mistaken identity. Could it be that this very thing that you cherish could be a barrier to something More?

Sounds like this might have been the case in our reading from Mark this morning. They cherished who they were as a group, and who can blame them? They cherished their "sweet Jesus and me" moments, and who can blame them? Yet these very attachments limited their ability to perceive that there was something bigger at work in the universe.

Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians (and I am reading from the Message translation): **"I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on the Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery. And we've been shown the mystery! I tell you these things to keep you from being fooled by fancy talk."** (Colossians 2:2-4)

Years ago I used to be enamored with persuasive arguments and the fancy talk of systematic theology. I might have even been attracted to Paul as the great logician, and looked forward to grappling with the dense theology of his letter to the church at Rome. I have to tell you that that orientation is not exactly what is feeding my soul these days. Over the past decades I have only grown deeper in what might be considered the arena of Contemplative Spirituality.

Furthermore, through this practice and orientation I have been able to let go of my insistence on easy answers – that "red velvet bag" I carried - and grow in my own sense of the immediacy of God's presence. Even though there is much I have let go of, it has enabled me to enter a more intriguing and captivating time of spiritual growth.

So back to that word "mystery" that Paul used. If you are like me, there might have been times when that word was used quite casually. We might have thrown our hands up in the air and said, "Don't worry about it. It's a mystery." But rather than using that word in a dismissive sense, I feel like I have finally developed an appreciation for the way that Rudolph Otto used the word back in 1923 when – and I am showing off my religious studies background - he referred to a "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*" - an experience of God in which one both

trembles, and is fascinated; where one is both repelled and attracted. This has actually become more and more descriptive of my experience.

While John Wesley had his heart “**strangely warmed,**” Saint Teresa of Avila writes, “**How does the soul make love to God?**”

**The heart has divine instincts; it just needs to be turned loose in the sky.**” She also writes, “**Any real ecstasy is a sign you are moving in the right direction, don't let any prude tell you otherwise.**”

Perhaps that “red velvet bag” you are carrying comes with a sense of decorum, and insistence that things be done “decently and in order.” Letting go of that insistence may allow you to open to the door to the unknown. What is in the bag no longer lives. What is on the other side of the door is very much alive. Perhaps you can even hear your name being called.

I am sure you would be interested to know that the parable I read earlier was conveyed by Thích Nhất Hạnh, though he was not the one who created the parable. I share this footnote to satisfy your curiosity, and not to then suggest that we all now become Buddhists. We are speaking of something here that is beyond religion.

In conclusion, we now live in an era where there is much to pull us down, and we could very well be pulled under. The parable described a person pulling their hair, beating their chest, and crying uncontrollably. In their agitated state of mind they could not hear the voice of the Beloved calling from the other side of the door. What are you carrying now that you have allowed to define who you are, that causes you to fear it is just some cheap trick when the Beloved calls your name? Only you can answer that question.

Surely we need to be anchored in the Eternal to protect ourselves, while casting out demons in the here and now.

Amen.

Mark 9:38 – 41

“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 afterward 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.