

Who's the Priest?**MARK 9: 33- 37 & 38-50****James 5:13-20****Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29****Psalms 19**

Now the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. We're not really sure that they know what they are the 'greatest' about, but hierarchy is really important in their pervasive honour/shame culture. The 'one-up-Manship' of honour and shame, I think, is maybe still alive in our culture even today.

So, Jesus reminds them, "whoever wants to be first must be last" and he uses a child as the example for who really points the way in the Kingdom of God ... a child. A child is most important. Unheard of in the first century and for quite a few centuries forward.

"Yeah, yeah" says John, "OK, so we can't be higher than each other, but Jesus, there's a guy out there that's casting out demons in your name ... and he's not even one of us ... you know, your special guys ... us disciples."

And Jesus says, "Wait a minute don't stop anyone from doing these things in my name."

For starters, everybody in the first century did and said things "in the name of someone they admired" so Jesus knew that it wasn't 'honouring him' that was the problem. It was really that the disciples had fallen victim to the age-old human problem of wanting to be special. Wanting to have the credentials that made them special. It was rampant in the Temple of the day ... priests and pharisees wanting to have the authority ... Romans wanting to have all the power ... men wanting to have all the influence in their families. It was pretty much everywhere, and it had come home to Jesus' very own, closest followers.

Jesus now brings the point home.

"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."

WHOEVER is not against us if for us! The old lines of distinction are gone ... no male or female, Judean or Syrian, no priest or pharisee, just believers helping all humanity to be believers. Christian worship and service is not reserved for a select group to perform on behalf of the rest, but rather is the role of every believer.

From Numbers 11:29

11:29 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!"

Think back to time of Moses ... somewhere about fifteen hundred years before Jesus ... thirty-five hundred years before us. The people that Moses was leading had just been slaves. Can you imagine how it must feel to be a slave? No one in society is lower than a slave. If all your family had been slaves for 400 years, you would be slave to the core. Can you imagine how it must feel to suddenly be a free person? That is whiplash. But more whiplash is coming. Shortly after you escape slavery, you are told you are a priestly people. That's what happened to the Hebrew people. And they're giving Moses a rough time about God's directive for all of them to be priestly.

From James 5:19-20

5:19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain between people and God was torn wide open (Matt. 27:51). Now, all believers have access to the holy God. No curtain separates the people from God. No longer do people need a priest to represent them before God. Everyone can go to God directly (Eph. 2:17-18). Priesthood changed. Some people understood the significance of the change. Some did not, but James got it. Not only can we be our own priests, but we need to be priests for each other.

AND the Baptist Distinctives say it ... That list of beliefs and practices that explain our distinction from other Christian traditions ... This Distinctive says:

“The Bible affirms the value of each person as having been created in the image of God, and also declares each person morally responsible for his/ her own nature and behaviour. Baptists believe that inherent in the worth of each person is also the right and competency of each individual personally to deal directly with God through Jesus Christ. **This principle also suggests our responsibility to serve other believers in intercession and nurture: we are priests to each other.**

Having said that, Baptists also believe that no group or individual has any right to compel others—forcefully or politically—to believe or worship as they do. Rather, Baptists have historically been champions of religious liberty.

So, this brings us to this moment in time. Our NOW ... we are responsible to minister to each other. I invite you to TURN TO YOUR NEIGHBOUR AND BE A MINISTER ... a smile ministers, a touch ministers.

But, what if they don't listen when I minister? How can we, who have read the bible and know what sinning is and what it isn't .. how can we convince people to NOT SIN without compelling them ... either forcefully or politically or by kicking them out of our congregation, or by ignoring them to the point that they just leave, or by refusing to be their friend, or by shutting them up in jail, or by taking away their drug of choice that numbs the pain. What are we to do?

Scripture says in response to the power urges of the disciples,

“Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them and taking it in his arms he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

“If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea.

I have here an interpretation issue. There is evidence among scholars that “cause to sin” is not the best interpretation for the Greek word **skandalisē**. Some scholars suggest a better translation here would be “to be offended by” ... “to be scandalized by”. A better translation may be “To be offended by a little one ...”

This word **skandalisē** is also used in Mark 14:27 where Jesus says, of the disciples' reaction on the night of his betrayal and arrest, in the King James interpretation, “²⁷ And Jesus saith unto them, “All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.” Other

versions says that the disciples will 'fall away', but this version says why they ran away ... because they are offended: scandalized by Jesus being arrested, they ran away and left him to his captors.

So our scripture today would be, "If any of you are offended by these little ones who believe in me ... If any of you are scandalized by 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.

And on we go to "If your hand (or what you do) causes you to be offended or scandalized cut it off, for it's better to enter life maimed than to be offended. If your foot (where you travel) causes you to be offended, cut it off ... if your eye (or what you see) causes you to be offended, tear it out, for it's better to be maimed, or crippled or blind ... all earthly attributes ... than to practice the sin of being offended. That sin that creates a division between you and me. That sin of 'being offended' that creates a division between me and those people who are doing something that will hurt themselves ... people who are in trouble. The last thing we should be doing, fellow priests, is letting anything keep us from loving other people ... especially those people who are in trouble.

But, if we can't force people to listen to our extremely wise, righteous, pious believer selves, what can we do?

Jesus is pretty clear about what we should do. He says, treat them like little children.

Then he took a little child and put it among them and taking it in his arms he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What would that look like? Somebody we love is being stupid, angry, careless, thoughtless, painfully self-destructive. Love them like you would love a wee baby. With kindness, tenderness. Babies don't even know our language so all we can really do is to smile, love, nurture, be kind...

Somebody who is destroying our community by hoisting tents with no bathrooms and no sources of water to keep clean, bringing rats and disease to our neighbourhoods ... love them as you would a little child that was vulnerable and didn't know better. Love them, be kind to them, offer the presence of God to them as if they were wee babies in need of our love ... because we all are in need of the compassion of God.

But if we are offended, we will treat that child of God with disdain and hostility, and we'll probably start doing things to show them how much smarter we are and how they need to do what we say ... but they can't understand us ... because they are babies. No to mention, but I will ... when we are offended, we become the centre of universe. "Why are you doing this terrible thing 'to me.'" "Why are you making me so uncomfortable?" Imagine, the wee baby is needing us, and we can only see our own discomfort.

The sin here is to be offended and to deny our responsibility to minister with love, compassion, understanding.

A few months ago, Paula brought us a message about 'Becoming the Church of Salt and Light'. She shared with us that Jesus had asked the disciples to be the salt of the 'earth oven', that is the salt that made the dung patties burn hotter in the ovens. There's a great goal, eh ... make the dung patties better. But it remains for us that salt makes things better ... brighter, hotter, tastier. Jesus says this day, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Be better as if infused by salt that makes the peace better ... a better more bright, more inspired peace between us and another person.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on tomorrow's National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. We are the priests and an entire population of people of indigenous heritage are in pain. No, the residential schools weren't our fault because we weren't there. No, we didn't beat the children for speaking their language, no we didn't damage the children, wounding them so deeply that their adult selves were broken. We weren't there. No, we can't give back the land that was stolen. Yes, the pain continues in the Indigenous population of this land. But we cannot sin by being offended as if their pain is somehow hurting you and me ... embarrassing you and me ... offending you and me. We cannot run away; we must stand and hear all the pain spewing as if the horrors are still happening on this very day. We are priests and must console. We are priests and must offer understanding ... NO ... don't slide back into the 'BUT'S' ... but we weren't there, but we didn't do anything ... We are the priests, and we MUST stand as if creating a world for us all together is our job, because it is our job.

So let's get out there and make creation saltier ... make the world a better place by standing firm with love in the face of all that could be offensive. Offer your love as if to a wee baby in the name and nature of our risen Christ, Jesus.

AMEN