

Road Builders or Road Blockers
Mark 9:38-50
October 14, 2012

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Grace, mercy, and peace from Jesus Christ, who is the Savior and Lord of all believers.

Well, Jesus’ disciples were at it again. Last Sunday we heard about how the disciples were so into an “it’s all about me” attitude that they were literally arguing over who was the most important. They were trying to figure out who was going to get which seat when Jesus took over in his new Kingdom (Mark 9:33-36). Grown men following the Savior of the world acting like spoiled children.

They were probably still secretly arguing among themselves when the news hit that someone was infringing on their territory. Someone had the audacity to start casting out demons in Jesus’ name. And that someone was not one of them, not one of the elite.

This could be real trouble. This could undermine the disciples’ power base. This could remove some of the specialness that the disciples thought they alone possessed. So, like spoiled children, they promptly went to Jesus and told him how they put an end to the activities of this unauthorized exorcist.

What else could they do? How dare this scoundrel use Jesus’ name when he wasn’t one of the chosen twelve? I can almost visualize Matthew coming to Jesus and saying, “Jesus, I’ve drawn up some papers. You sign here, I’ll get these notarized, and by the end of the day your name will be a registered trademark, protected by law. Then the next time that guy uses your name we can nail him for copyright infringement.”

However, Jesus wasn’t of the same persuasion as the disciples. He told the disciples to leave the man alone. Jesus explained that no one can be doing the work of God’s Kingdom and the work of Satan at the same time. The summation of Jesus’ point is something we must not forget: *Whoever is not against us is for us* (Mk 9:40).

With that, Jesus dealt with the immediate problem of the outsider using his name. But Jesus knew that the real problem was what caused the disciples to react like they did. The whole event had a very destructive, underlying cause. The disciples were beginning to draw circles to define who was in the Kingdom and who was out of the Kingdom. The problem with these circles is that they had nothing to do with trying to draw people into the Kingdom.

Sometimes it's important to draw circles so that people can be told that they are outside God's will and that they need to change. When the church declares that certain activities and lifestyles are outside of God's will, it does so in order to give people the opportunity to step away from those things and step into God's will for their lives.

But that was not the case with the man in today's reading. He wasn't doing anything wrong. In fact, he was doing something right. He was casting out evil. He was invoking the name of Christ to defeat the power of Satan. You will be hard pressed to prove that is outside of the will of God.

If the disciples would have been doing their job, they would have gone to that man with a different attitude. They would have asked him if he wanted to meet Jesus in person and become a disciple like they were. But they didn't go and invite him to join them. Instead, they went to Jesus to condemn this man. I'm sure the disciples would have liked nothing more than to have Jesus go and really give this outsider the "what fors."

The disciples had drawn a self-centered, self-serving circle not to draw people closer to Jesus and God's will, but to keep Jesus all to themselves. They liked things just as they were and they didn't see any need for change or newcomers.

The mindset of these disciples would have dealt a fatal blow to the church which Jesus came to establish. For that reason, Jesus addressed this problem head on. He said: *If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck* (Mk 9:42 NIV).

Those are strong words and Jesus backed them up with even stronger words: *If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell* (Mk 9:43-47 NIV).

Jesus used strong language so the disciples would be sure to get his point. They were supposed to be building roads that would lead people to the Kingdom of God. They were supposed to be heavenly highway builders, but that isn't what they were doing. Instead of building roads they were setting up roadblocks. Instead of making a way for this man to meet his Savior face to face, they were looking for ways to keep him on the outside.

Jesus said that anyone, who becomes an obstacle to another person, who is trying to walk the walk of faith, is in big trouble. It would be better for that person to drown than to face what eternity had in store for him.

We can see from the Bible that Jesus' disciples learned their lesson. They learned to be road-builders and not road-blockers. They learned to lead people to Jesus not keep people from Jesus. They learned how to build roads for Samaritans and women of ill repute, roads for Ethiopian eunuchs and tax collectors, and eventually even roads for the Greeks and Romans. They took seriously the Lord's warning about placing stumbling blocks in the paths of God's little ones. The question is – have we?

Many churches use God's call to holiness as a wall to keep people out instead of a road to lead people in. Their actions, their inactions, sometimes even their words, say, "You're a sinner. You're not one of us." They might just as well put a sign on the door that reads "Holy people only. Sinners not allowed." Instead of making a way for the person to escape from his bondage to sin, the church places a roadblock in his path.

There are other roadblocks, too. Some churches and some Christians look down on other churches and Christians because they pray in a different way. Other times the problem is raising hands in praise to God, a different form of music, or offering an "Amen" of affirmation to what is being said. Brothers and sisters in Christ are engaging in name-calling and mud-slinging because other Christians don't do everything the way they do.

The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod could be standing on the verge of a damaging split. Do you know what it is over? It's not over doctrine. It's over worship style. There is a simmering feud over whether churches must use the exact words in the hymnal or whether they can be creative with the liturgy. There is dissent over whether churches can only sing songs from an authorized hymnal or whether all songs that are doctrinally correct are acceptable.

Recently, I was talking with another LCMS pastor and I mentioned that by 2014 there could be a serious shortage of pastors because the baby-boomers will be retiring. His response was, "Good. Maybe all the pastors who like contemporary worship will leave." Does that sound like a road-builder or a road-blocker?

Petty arguments and petty differences have been splitting the church ever since Christ returned to heaven. Today's Gospel reading shows us that the seeds of that pettiness were planted even while Jesus was here, and because of human sinfulness those seeds never died. Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth: *My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is the body of Christ divided?* (1 Cor 1:11-13 NIV).

No matter what the argument is about, every time the Church fights with itself it puts up

a roadblock. These roadblocks can drive believers with weak faith away from the Church. Worse yet, these roadblocks make the Church, and our Savior, look undesirable to the unbeliever who is seeking the truth.

If the Church today is to learn the lesson of road-building and not road-blocking, God's people are going to have to stop looking at themselves and start looking at Jesus. While we must never compromise Biblical teaching, it's time for Christians to stop thinking about themselves and start thinking about those who are on the fast track to hell. It's time for Christians to stop fighting each other and start fighting Satan.

Friends, the love of Jesus brought him from heaven to earth. That love moved him to live for us, to die for us, and to rise for us. Jesus established his Church so everyone, and Jesus means everyone, might be accepted. When we fight among ourselves, when we fail to offer the Gospel in a form that unbelievers can understand, we denigrate Christ's love and his Church. Today, because Jesus loves us and we love him, let us dedicate ourselves to be road-builders not road-blockers.