

**September 26, 2021**  
**Mark 9:38-50**  
**“Obstacle or Vehicle?”**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

In our reading from Mark's gospel this morning, as Mary Grey just read for us, we find the disciples once again missing the point. Their egos, again or still, getting in the way of the WAY of Jesus.

In this case, they get caught up in turf-marking questions about who is IN and who is OUT. They're upset that someone else has been casting out demons in Jesus's name. That someone else has been healing in Jesus's name. They try to stop him because, they say, "he was not following us." He's not one of us. He's not a true follower.

And what does Jesus say? "Do not stop him . . . Whoever is not against us is for us." And in so saying, reminds the disciples – his first would-be followers – that following him is about following the Way, not the person. The Way of radical, boundary-busting, justice-seeking, life-giving, liberating love.

Love is as love does. A drink of water is a drink of water in a thirsty world; it doesn't matter who offers it. Unless of course, we're talking about Nestle or Coca-Cola or some other corporate entity buying up freshwater rights so they can turn around and sell that drink of water in a plastic bottle. But that's another conversation for another time.

On that broader theme of justice, though, justice as a foundational element of the Way, James Cone writes, in his book *Black Theology and Black Power*, "God's reality is not bound by one manifestation of the divine in Jesus but can be found wherever people are being empowered to fight for freedom. Life-giving power for the poor and oppressed is the primary criterion that we must use to judge the adequacy of our theology." And I would add, our politics. Justice is justice in an unjust world, it doesn't matter who makes it possible.

The truth is, it takes all of us. Love is as love does.

In the text immediately preceding this one, which we read last week but didn't engage, we find the disciples caught up in ladder-climbing questions, this time arguing about who among them – Jesus' would-be followers – is the greatest. Again, missing the point, getting in their own way, letting their egos get in the way of the WAY of Jesus.

Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, but they're too afraid to say. Like a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar, they know they're busted. They know Jesus knows full well the answer to his question. We can picture them, heads down, avoiding eye contact at all costs.

"What were you arguing about?"

"Nothin."

So Jesus sits his band of misfit disciples down and provides another reminder of what the Way is all about. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." There you go. And then he provides a visual aid to drive the point home: a little child. The epitome of vulnerability and powerlessness in a social context where children were not valued. Where children were largely invisible, neither seen nor heard.

We don't know who this little child is or where they come from, but Jesus puts the previously invisible child front and center, fully visible in the middle of their circle. And then he takes the child in his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Echoing his famous teaching found in Matthew's gospel: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these," those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, in prison, those "who are members of my family, you did it to me." Whoever welcomes, whoever offers food or drink or hospitality or clothing or healing or companionship, is following me and my Way. Whoever is able to see and affirm that of God in another, as the Quakers put it, is following me and my Way. The Way of love.

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water is universal, equitable and sustainable access to clean, safe and affordable drinking water. Justice is justice, no matter who makes it possible. Love is as love does.

Continuing, then, back in this morning's reading, children are at the center again. Jesus says, in what, quite frankly, sounds like a threat, "If any of you," IF ANY OF YOU, SO HELP ME, "put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me," before one of these little ones, "it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." You would be better off dead.

That is a wake-up call! It gets your attention, and it was certainly meant to get the disciples' attention—distracted as they were by the various trappings of self-righteousness as Jesus's newly chosen disciples.

We already know that Jesus's Way has everything to do with how we treat the little ones, the littlest ones, the so-called "least of these." And here Jesus give us a big old dose of hyperbole to make his point. Hyperbole is not meant to be taken literally, of course, only to get your attention. Hyperbole, from the Greek, meaning, as you know, "exaggeration." Literally "a throwing beyond." In this case, Jesus throws the disciples – and us with them – well beyond the status quo and any pedestrian understanding of the importance of NOT causing any little ones to stumble. Not getting in the way of the Way.

Jesus says it would be better, hyperbolically speaking, for you to be DEAD than to prevent LIFE for the little ones, the least of these, each Other. Get it. It's REALLY, REALLY, REALLY important that you NOT get in the way of each other's experience of love, and with it, life, abundant life – ESPECIALLY the little ones, the least of these. Take that responsibility seriously, Jesus says, life-or-death serious.

DON'T be an obstacle. DON'T get in the way of the Way. And in contrast, in welcoming the little child, he's really saying, "DO be a vehicle." DO make way for the Way.

Are you an OBSTACLE or are you a VEHICLE to divine love and abundant life for each other? In your life? In your lifestyle? In your work? In your relationships? In your decisions?

In the way you interact with and treat those around you, those with whom you daily come in contact? In the way you interact with and treat the planet. Are you an OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE?

To be clear, as Jesus was and many other prophets have been since, you're either one or the other. NOT being an obstacle to love and compassion and justice is not the same as BEING a VEHICLE to love and compassion and justice. Both are critical – NOT being an obstacle is not enough for love and compassion and justice to take root.

“Truly I tell you,” says Jesus on the flip side of his earlier teaching, “just as you did NOT do it” – individually and collectively – “to one of the least of these, you did NOT do it to me.” We can't stop at simply NOT being obstacles, we have to DO something!

William Sloane Coffin elaborates, “Christians have no business thinking that the good life consists mainly in not doing bad things. We have no business thinking that to do evil in this world you have to be a Bengal tiger, when, in fact, it is enough to be a tame tabby—a nice person but not a good one. In short, (it's) clear that nothing is so fatal to Christianity as indifference.”

The disciples keep chasing the wrong questions: Who's in and who's out? Who's first and who's last? Who's the greatest? But for would-be followers of the Way of Jesus, the Way of God, the Way of love, the fundamental question is: Are you an OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE to that Way?

Jesus offers a firm warning against being obstacles to others, especially the most vulnerable others. But he goes on to apply that same warning against being obstacles to ourselves, getting in our own way. And he does it with another round of shocking hyperbole.

“If your hand causes YOU to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell . . .” If your foot causes YOU to stumble, cut it off! If your eye causes YOU to stumble, tear it out!

This vivid, graphic description actually give us some deeper insight, I think, into Jesus's assertion – as we explored a few weeks ago – that in order to save our lives we have to lose them. That in order to save our lives – for his sake, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the Way – we have to lose them. If your life is causing you to stumble, to stray from the Way of love, then lose it. And I promise you'll get it back a hundredfold.

There would be nothing left of any of us, of course, if we were to take Jesus's instruction literally, but the point is that it's just as important that you NOT be a stumbling block to yourselves in the Way of love, as it is to NOT be a stumbling block for others. It's REALLY, REALLY, REALLY important! Take it seriously, life-or-death serious.

So call it stumbling blocks, call it sin, call it whatever you want, but be willing to acknowledge and confront – individually and collectively – whatever threatens to distract you, to turn you away, to separate you, from the divine presence in yourselves and each other, including all of creation. Whatever gets in the way of loving relationship with God, and loving relationship with your neighbors as yourselves. Whatever gets in the way of abundance and justice.

Get rid of the obstacles so you can become better vehicles. Do whatever you need to. It's THAT important! The kin-dom of God depends on it. Are you an OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE?

Are you an OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE to affirming and living out of your own divine belovedness? And are you an OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE to helping others do the same?

Are you an OBSTACLE OR a VEHICLE to helping make possible God's beloved community of love and justice? Are you and OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE to helping realize God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven? Are you an OBSTACLE or a VEHICLE?

May you, may we, be vehicles. Making way for the Way of divine love and abundant life for all.

May it be so.