

Building a Church for All Generations
Rev. Jonathan Morgan
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Mark 9:38-50
September 27, 2015

“Teacher, we saw someone doing amazing things in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Mark 9 is an interesting passage, this morning we heard how the disciples lost sight of Jesus’ vision again. Let me share how I resonate with this story by way of another story, a story that began with words I’ll not soon forget. “You need to visit Mr. Martinez in Room 34B. I just told him he has 6 weeks to live.”

This is what I heard as a 24 years old chaplain, with just a little more than a week of experience, working on a surgical floor of a hospital just north of Boston. Those words, still echoing in the deepest recesses of my psyche, belonged to the attending physician of the floor.

I remember making my way to the patient’s room without the benefit of knowing what to expect, or what to say, or what to do. Should I try to cheer him up? Should I just hold his hand if he starts to sob? Should I be ready with a few scripture quotes that might lighten his burden? Should I just run?

Entering his room I found the patient lying in his bed facing the door. “Good morning Mr. Martinez,” I said, trying not to sound too cheery.

“Good morning!” came his reply followed immediately by a question, “Are you a doctor?”

“No, I am not. I am the floor chaplain and I thought I might come by so we could have a visit together.”

“Ok,” He said politely. And yet, his graciousness could not hide the cloud of anxiety that appeared on his face when my identity was made clear to him. I was VERY young.

As I made my way toward his bed, Mr. Martinez turned slowly, painfully away from me to face the wall. A position he retained for the entire visit.

What transpired next was a very difficult and largely unsuccessful visit, with me doing my best to reach this dear man who had just received very hard news about his true mortality and Mr. Martinez responding to my numerous inquiries with one word answers.

“Yes. No. OK. No. Sometimes.”

Despite my limited experience as a chaplain it didn’t take me long to figure out that my patient, my charge, wanted nothing to do with me. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I offered Mr. Martinez my best wishes, promised him I would come for another visit sometime, and hastily made my way out of the room feeling utterly useless and defeated. And sad, sad that Mr. Martinez was now alone without the company of someone to care for his spiritual needs. I went back to the nurse’s station and sat there for some time, staring at the door to his room, wondering what to do.

I then noticed that the Nutritionist, a woman about my age, was headed toward his room. I had half a mind to run after her and head her off at the pass. Obviously with such a heavy diagnosis to digest he wouldn't be hungry any time soon, so who could blame him if he just blew up and threw her out of his room.

With a degree of twisted curiosity I watch the door for the inevitable to happen. "Get out! Get out! Just leave me alone!" was what I expected to hear at any moment. But, the moment turned into minutes, a lot of them —10, 15, 20 minutes, the anticipated rejection never happened.

Finally, the nutritionist emerged from his room looking somewhat shaken and most certainly changed. She sat next to me with a sigh and looked into my eyes, "That was something!" she said.

"What happened?" I asked.

She took a deep breath and offered, "I am not really sure. He just started pouring out his life to me. All kinds of things, and then he wanted to hold my hand. I didn't know what to do so I just listened and then at the end I said a prayer for him. He asked me to come back tomorrow."

From my heart rose a rather indignant feeling, "Hey! That's my job. You were doing MY job!"

As she headed off to her next patient I sat there in prayerful meditation. "Teacher, I saw her doing amazing things in your name. I tried to stop her, because she was not following us, she never attended seminary. She is a Nutritionist for heaven's sake!"

I was so disappointed and a little angry, but slowly the indignation turned into a type of revelation. I still remember that moment in the Nurse's Station when the lesson hit home. Sometimes Jon you will not be the one to bring healing or comfort or wholeness no matter how hard you might try, but you can support the one who can.

It was the moment I realized more fully that God uses the gifts of everyone to do God's work: to serve the needs of those who live without hope, to bring light and love into situations that feel shrouded in hatred and strife, to be the Church whenever and wherever God's Grace is needed. It is an education that has been reinforced many times during my life and it has defined my ministry. And as we can see from this week's scripture passage, it was a lesson that the disciples needed to learn more than once.

Last week, we read in the Gospel of Mark how the disciples were trying to create a hierarchy within the movement that Jesus was trying to start. Arguing amongst themselves who was better than the rest, more worthy.

Jesus put things straight by welcoming a child to the center of the community and while wrapping his arms around the child, who represented the voiceless ones, he suggests that if one wants to be great, then one must become a servant leader welcoming the voiceless to the very center of the community. To expand the community's center to include those people at the margins. Even to make the margins the new center of the community because that is where the welcoming presence of God dwells.

This was not an easy lesson for the disciples to embrace because this week we read that the disciples are at it again by running to their teacher and tattling on someone they were *convinced* wasn't authorized to do ministry because he wasn't part of the inner circle of followers.

Again they expose their ignorance, trying to separate and exclude, while Jesus was teaching them how to embrace without exception. The disciples were fixated on creating boundaries between those who were *in* and those who were definitely *out*, while Jesus was blowing open the doors of convention to reveal the light and worth of ALL of God's children.

You see, Jesus was trying to create a very different world in which to live. A place where everyone's voice is heard, where everyone's value is honored and unique gifts embraced, where everyone is part of a larger whole that has God's love at its center. Something we in Christianity call the Body of Christ.

Can we imagine such a world today? Can we make it a reality? I would like to try by starting here in this place.

Today, we mark the beginning of our Stewardship season by lifting up a theme we hope to live into in the coming weeks and months, and years. To come together as God's people intent upon *Building a Church for ALL Generations*.

What does *Building a Church for All Generations* mean? To me it means being a community of faith where everyone knows they are welcomed; where everyone's gifts are valued and where everyone is assured that they belong.

To be the church that strives to bring together people of every generation so that all might benefit from the energy and vitality of our youth, and the patience and wisdom from those with more experience, to support one another so that we might be stronger as a whole. To be the church that honors, nurtures and reflects the gifts of all our people, of every age, that we might truly be the Body of Christ in this world.

That is what *Building a Church for All Generations* means to me.

What about you? I invite you to help us expand this vision and make it a reality, starting with our congregational meeting immediately after worship in Fellowship Hall. We have some ideas to share and we want to hear yours.

I invite you to support this vision with your time, your resources, and your prayers that we might better reflect what Jesus was trying to create when he started this movement so many years ago. I invite you to help us BE the church for ALL generations.

Let us pray,

Gracious God, we long to know your Presence,

To feel the movement of your spirit.

Lead us, now into practices from which our spirits shrink because the demand is so great.

Give to us quiet confidence, to create a space, a ministry, a community of faith, that welcomes and reflects the gifts of every generation of your children.

Let us be true to that vision you have put before us through the life and ministry and love of Jesus. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.

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.