

**Building the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God:  
The hand that stops us and the foot that trips us**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, September 27, 2009.*

*Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50*

Moses and Jesus both have their loyal followers—almost too loyal, the followers are protective to a fault. Moses has suffered from burnout, the result of hearing the constant grumbling of people who are nostalgic for the good old days of slavery in Egypt and are unable to imagine the Promised Land that is ahead of them. God has just appointed seventy elders to help out Moses, “so you don’t have to bear the burden all by yourself,” says God wisely. But Eldad and Medad have joined the ranks unauthorized, so to speak, without God’s permission, let alone Moses’, and Joshua complains, “Stop them!”

Jesus has his loyal followers, too, who closely guard him. He is constantly surrounded by crowds awed by his healing powers, attracted by how he feeds and invites and welcomes and forgives and casts out demons, restoring a broken people to community with one another. The disciples are learning how to heal the sick and cast out demons also. But someone is getting rid of demons without their permission, and by God, we must stop him!

Moses is gracious about the outsider. “Are you jealous for my sake?” he asks. “I wish everybody would prophesy for God!” Jesus first says, like Moses, “Don’t worry, whoever is not against us is for us.” But then he warns us not to stop the journey to the kingdom of God. His warnings—probably nobody’s favorite Bible passage—must strike fear into the hearts of anybody who truly believes in the literal interpretation of Scripture. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God maimed than to have two hands and go to hell.” What literal-minded pastor, at least if he is honest about our human condition, does not picture an entire congregation full of one-handed, one-eyed members?

Theoretically, it makes perfect sense that we should willingly give up anything that gets in the way of life with God. I can think of a whole laundry list of sins that cause us to stumble on our road towards the kingdom of God. We all know how poisonous resentment and long-standing grudges can be, or arrogance, pride, and all those other things that we silently confess every Sunday. Talking about our personal sins, as stumbling blocks to our personal salvation, is the usual way of interpreting Jesus’ warnings. It’s also enough to scare the bejeebers out of us.

But I want to look at these stumbling blocks to the kingdom of God in a different way—with the body as community. Jesus is focused on the kingdom of God, and especially on the reign of God in community. God created us in his image and created us to be in relationship with God and in community with one another. Since the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has been building up a community that would live the life of the kingdom of God—not just a community of twelve disciples who have copyright control

over his name and his work. This is a community of people who have been on the outside and are now restored to common life. He has taken people marginalized by diseases that have made them outcast, and healed them, and restored them to their place in society. He has invited the poor and the sinners to the table with him, expanding the community to include all of humanity. THIS is what the kingdom of God is all about. He is saying that God's kingdom is a lot vaster than we have ever allowed it to be, with our criteria of eligibility for who's in and who's out. His own community, the Body of Christ, is to be made up of members whose only token of eligibility is their humanity—that they were created in the image of God.

Looking at the body as the Body of Christ, let's ask what are the stumbling blocks that keep us from living as the Body of Christ that Jesus so desired? What beliefs in our society, what assumptions, what practices keep the Body of Christ from being truly the community of the reign of God? What is the hand that causes the Christian community, or the human community, to stumble? What is the foot that keeps us from walking in a right relationship with God? What is the eye that prevents us from seeing the face of Christ in those outside our inner circles?

The fiercely protective followers of Moses and Jesus show us one way that diminishes the Body of Christ, whenever more ready to exclude than to welcome the outsider. Casting out demons and proclaiming God's word is not the personal privilege of Christians, let alone of Episcopalians. It is the challenge for all of us, and a reason for rejoicing if all would take up that challenge. In one of our prayers, we ask God to break down the walls that separate us, uniting us in bonds of love, so that all nations and races may serve God in harmony and love. Instead of holding up our hands in rejection, let us hold out our hands in welcome.

A second stumbling block for the Body of Christ, the foot that often trips us up, is the foot that insists on walking alone, as if our spiritual life is an individual matter, an affair between me and God. Our problems with health care, immigration, the financial system, economic inequalities—all these show that we have lost the sense of the common good as a compass point for our society. As Americans and fierce believers in individualism, we often walk alone and expect others to, also. But we can't walk alone anymore. We are just beginning to raise a moral voice to call for the end of atrocities in Darfur. As we seek a deeper spirituality during these troubling times in our world and in our church, it is important to remember that our spirituality is dependent on our community and our relationships, on the ways in which we grow in love, compassion, and respect for one another. Our spirituality is intimately connected with the way in which we treat each other and the way in which we treat the broken among us. Because all of us are broken, are we not? All of us are one-handed, one-eyed disciples. How many of us followers of Christ have never stumbled on our spiritual journey? We pray, in the service of Compline, that "we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil." So it is with our spiritual life also. Instead of limping alone with one foot, we can enrich our lives by walking together.

Last weekend, a few lay colleagues and I attended a diocesan conference on Common Ministry—the hope and practice of churches to work together to create a more just society. It will be good to learn to work in collaboration with one another. Come to the Ministry Fair downstairs in the Undercroft and join us in common ministry within this cathedral, the Body of Christ in this place. And don't let anybody stop you! Amen.