

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

# Response to What Derails Faith

James 5: 13-20  
Mark 9: 38-50

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*“If any of you put a stumbling block before 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.”*

Prayer: Holy One, our song IS our prayer... change our hearts, O God, make us be like you, see like you, think like you, love like you... even as we grow in faith on this journey. Amen.

It doesn't hurt to take a good look at yourself from time to time and reflect upon your attitudes and your perspectives. This story should help get you started.

During a visit to the mental hospital, a visitor asked the Director what the criterion was which defined whether or not a patient should be institutionalized. “Well,” said the Director, “we fill up a bathtub; then we offer a teaspoon, a teacup, and a bucket to the patient and ask him or her to empty the bathtub.” “Oh, I understand,” said the visitor. “A normal person would use the bucket because it's bigger than the spoon or the teacup.” “No,” said the Director, “A normal person would pull the plug. Do you want a bed near the window?”

([http://www.wfa.org/newsletter/archive/2006/0645\\_061110/0645\\_061110.html#3](http://www.wfa.org/newsletter/archive/2006/0645_061110/0645_061110.html#3), retrieved September 25, 2009). Would you like to sign now on the dotted line?

It's often a good thing to see things from another perspective, isn't it? It's good to understand attitudes and perspectives that we may not have endorsed. Without that ability, we easily could get lost in our own way of thinking, our particular way of assessing a situation. And then, when it comes right down to the bottom line, it's too easy to think that someone else's perspective is flat out wrong, and we are unequivocally right.

The disciple John has a frame of mind that is like that. John's mentality is that because this other person casting out demons in the name of Jesus was not on the road with the them, that this guy should be stopped from casting out demons. The saying is true sometimes, isn't it, that you can't see the forest for the trees? John couldn't see the bigger picture of the forest because there is too much focus on the diversity of the trees. He couldn't see that the forest of healing someone is more valuable than the difference of that guy not following on the road, not being like them totally.

I wonder if being stuck on the lack of like-mindedness could derail faith? Could that be a stumbling block?

I have the joy of serving as the President of the Harrisburg Association in the United Church of Christ. But, sometimes that job comes with a not-so-pleasant responsibility—responding to a church that has chosen to disaffiliate itself from the

UCC. The Valleys UCC in Halifax voted on August 30th to leave, and one reason they cited was that their identity was in question because they disagreed with some of the more liberal political stances the national UCC has taken on some of today's social issues. In other words, they struggled with the fact that they weren't *like* the national church. They saw differences in the trees... and felt they had to get out of the forest. They couldn't see the forest enough to affirm that we are strengthened by our common roots of doing ministry in Christ's name *and* by different theological perspectives that prompt thoughtful dialogue. They couldn't see that each church's identity is anchored in a covenantal relationship that respects many differences, yet affirms the invitation to share worship life and faithful living together. So, they left, and the possibilities of growing in faith with each other are derailed.

Acceptance of diversity is a powerful response to what can potentially derail faith growth. Listening to and dialoguing with those who have different perspectives are valuable and great responses to what can derail faith.

An old man named Calvin had lived a good life as a farmer for years. One day a new pastor came to the community and visited Calvin and asked him what church he belonged to. Calvin answered the question like this: "When my grain gets ready for selling, after I've harvested it and packaged it, I can take it to town

by any one of three roads the river road, the dirt road, or the highway. But when I get my grain to town and go to the buyer to sell him what I have, he never looks at me and asks, ‘Calvin, which road did you take to get your grain to town?’ What he does ask is if my grain is any good” (Sermon Resources for September 27, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com), retrieved September 24, 2009) .

Jesus recognizes the goodness of the deed of power the man performed, and Jesus teaches that tolerance for that work is justified, even though there was this other detail of the man not following on the journey.

We, I think, are invited to learn the same thing. Have tolerance for others. This is a good response to what derails faith, I think. Have openness, have modesty, have humility, have respect for others who may practice faith differently than we do, who live differently than we do, who see life through different experiences that are uncommon for us. The lack of those characteristics in us may derail someone’s faith. Not having those characteristics may prove to be a stumbling block to someone’s belief.

Jesus teaches how important it is to move away from anything that might be a stumbling block for someone else’s faith and belief. To make the point vivid, Jesus again invites us to be a bit introspective. What is it that might be a stumbling block to faith growth? What could derail faith in you or in another? Once you know...

move away from it. Cut it out of your life. Cut it off! To make the point vivid and powerful, Jesus uses the metaphor of cutting off bodily parts if they cause you to sin. If I offend anyone who takes the Bible literally, well, I'm sorry, but Jesus is not meaning this literally! He is not into self-mutilation! No one should take these words literally! In fact, I wonder if taking the Bible as literally as possible could result in derailing one's faith.

A.J. Jacobs is an American journalist who grew concerned about fundamentalism and people who try to take the Bible literally. He wondered what it might be like to take everything in it literally. So, as an experiment, he chose to live for one full year according to all the moral codes expressed in the Bible, including stoning adulterers. He tells a story of being in small public park on the upper West Side of New York. He encountered an elderly man who asked AJ why he dressed funny. "I'm trying to live by all the rules in the Bible, the ten commandments, stoning adulterers. "I'm an adulterer," said the old man. "You going to stone me?" "Well, yes, that would be great!" AJ explains that the Bible requires stoning for adulterers but does not specify the size of the stones. So, he pulls out of his pocket some... pebbles. As AJ fishes out the pebbles, the man grabs one out of his hand, and chucks it right at AJ's face. AJ in turn, remembering the biblical mandate "an eye for an eye..." fires a pebble right at the man's chest. The two then have a silent staring contest for 10 seconds, and the man walked

away, brushing AJ's shoulder as he left.

AJ went on to say that “Bible has so much wisdom and compassion and beauty that if you insist that everything has to be taken literally, then you're missing out on so much of it” ([http://fora.tv/2007/10/24/A\\_J\\_\\_Jacobs\\_Year\\_of\\_Living\\_Biblically](http://fora.tv/2007/10/24/A_J__Jacobs_Year_of_Living_Biblically), retrieved September 25, 2009). And by missing out, faith can get derailed. AJ did say that he had no reason to cut off anything from his body during that year... thank God!

How should we respond then if taking the Bible literally entirely can potentially derail faith? Should we throw it out? No, of course not. Each of us has to respond on our own, however. Let me offer four brief guidelines for discernment of biblical text that can lead to your unique response—these actually go in an interactive circle meaning they happen simultaneously and interact with each other:

- 1) **Study the biblical text.** Explore the words themselves and then also the context of the written work. Find out the author and the audience, and as best as you can, the meaning the author/speaker intended. Decide if a literal interpretation makes sense for you in this day.
- 2) **Engage in conversation with others.** This can mean dialoguing with your friends, your co-workers over lunch, with me, if you wish. It can mean

reading books, studying those who are knowledgeable, listening to preachers and speakers on the subject.

3) **Know culture and society's values.** Have an awareness of what our culture values in its mores, norms, and guidelines. Morals come into play here, as do ethics.

4) **Pray.** Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit on any matter. Become a partner with God in your discernment process. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

Now as all four happen simultaneously, where they intersect is the place where your unique response to what can derail faith is born in you. That's where you can live as a person of faith. That's where you can practice your faith, keeping at bay anything that can derail it. That's where your respect, openness, and hospitality toward others and their perspectives grows.

As a result, the interactive circle continues. The love of God grows. Faith in God deepens. A desire to call upon God for everything and anything develops.

So! People of God, rejoice in the Lord! Make a joyful noise, everyone, for God, I believe, is involved with us as we grow in faith and are on this journey together. Amen.