



Luke 9:37-50

“One Hero On This Team”

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2nd Sunday in Advent

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“Following Christ from City Center”

VIIA': LUKE 9:37-50, 51, "ONE HERO ON THIS TEAM"

1) vv.37-43a DISCIPLES' FAILURE AT EXORCISM AFTER EARLIER SUCCESS. = Lk. 9:1-11

37 a **On the next day**, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. //Mk. 9:14-29

38 *And behold*, a man from the crowd *cried*, Only Child = 7:12, 8:42

39 "Teacher, I *beg you to look upon* my son, *for he is my only child*; 1:48, Plea for Mercy: Prayer to Jesus

and behold, a spirit seizes him, Shared Diagnosis: Spirit Invader

and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him till he foams, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. 4 Symptoms

40 b And I *begged* your disciples to **CAST IT OUT**, Embarrassing Public Defeat

but they could not." Mission Over, Not Empowered, Failure Of Followers

Lack Power, Failure + 3 Misunderstandings **FAILURE** (1)

41 b' Jesus answered, Rebuke Of Jesus To Disciples

"O faithless '*and perverse*' generation, Deut. 32:4-6, 20, Laments, 7:31, 11:29-32, 50-51, 16:8, 17:25, 21:32

how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Is. 46:4, 65:2, Jer. 5:21-23, Ezek. 12:2

Bring *your son* here." Jesus Takes, Blesses, Returns, 5:12-14, 17-26, 6:6-11, 7:15, 9:42, 6:38

42 a' While he was coming, the **DEMON** tore him and convulsed him. 4:35, Manifestation in Presence Of Jesus

1 But Jesus rebuked (*epitimaō*) the unclean spirit, 4 Level Healing = Spirit, Body, Kinship, Worship

2 *and healed the boy*, //9:21, Deliverance, Blurring Of Distinctions

3 *and gave him back to his father.* Demolishes Satan's Works, Compassion, Family Restored, 7:15

43 4 *And ALL were astonished at the majesty of God.* 9:29, 5:25-26, 7:16, 24:53, Indirect Christology

Jesus Deals With Evil Not With Power But Suffering

2) vv.43b-45 THE DISCIPLES MISUNDERSTAND THE COMING PASSION. Mk. 9:30-32

Not Power, Passion Emphasized Here

44 *But while they were ALL marveling at everything he did*, he said to his disciples, Marveling Is Short-Lived

"Let these words sink into your ears; Ex. 17:14, Walk A Path Titled *Unknown*

for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men." p.v. Abbreviated? 2nd Prediction: //9:22

45 a But they did not understand *this saying*, 8:10, Lk.'s Footnote, Not Understand: Acts 3:17, 13:27

b *and it was concealed (veiled) from them*, Not Yet Meant To Know Till 24:13-35, 45-47

b' *that they should not perceive it;* Not Perceive

a' and they were afraid to ask him *about this saying*. Full Of Fear

Lack Understanding, **BLIND/ FEARFUL** (2)

2') vv.46-48 THE DISCIPLES MISUNDERSTAND WORTH AND GREATNESS.

Lack Humility, Honor Culture, **COMPETITIVE WITH ONE ANOTHER** (3)

46 a Instead, an argument (debate) arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. Mk. 9:33-37, Why?

Outside Jesus' Immediate Hearing, 22:21-24

47 b *But when Jesus perceived the thought (debate) of their hearts*, //2:35, 5:22, 6:8, 7:40, Acts 1:24

he took a child and put him *by his side*, Place Of Honor, 7:32 No Naivete, Parabolic Action

48 b' and said to them, Insignificant/Disposable In That World, Females Often Exposed

"Whoever receives *this child in my name* (i.e. in my behalf) v.49, Children Not Bestow Honor

receives me, With A Commission (4:18, 43)

and whoever receives me "The Agent Is As The Sender," *M. Berakoth* 5.5, Child As Agent

receives him who sent me; To Welcome Child = Welcome God, 10:16, Prophetic Commission

Can You Be At A Child's Side

a' *for he who is least among you ALL is the one who is great.*" Brokers, Jesus Conferred Privilege/Power

To Have A Commission Makes You Great, No Unimportant People

1') vv.49-51 THE DISCIPLES MISUNDERSTAND COOPERATION & COMPETITION.

Mk. 9:38-41, Kingdom Community Does Not Have Turf To Protect: Open

49 John answered, 9:54, John At Transfiguration, Witness To Jesus' Success

"Master, we saw a man **CASTING OUT DEMONS** in your name, 9:33, An Independent, Kingdom Work: Success

and we forbade him, because he does not follow with us." Boundary Created, Franchise Mentality: Only Us!

50 But Jesus said to him, Grace Is At Work Beyond Them, But Not Apart From Jesus

Lack Hospitality, **CONTENTIOUS WITH OTHERS** (4)

"Do not forbid him; 'for he that is not against you is for you.'" Proverb, Need All Friends They Can Get! 21:12, 16-17

51 **When the days drew near** for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 9:51-19:28, OBEDIENCE

No Copyright Or License! Num. 11:24-30

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 9:37-50

This four-part thought unit (A' 9:37-50) ends the essay (9:1-50). The unit boundary is marked by an inclusion: *cast it out* (v.40), *demon* (v.42) // *casting out demons* (v. 49) and a time signature: *on the next day* (v.37) // *When the days drew near* (v.51). The structure is concentric (1-2-2'-1'). The link words *astonished* (v.43) and *marveling* (v.44) tie sections 1 & 2 together; *in my name* (v.48) and *in your name* (49) link sections 2' & 1'. The word *ALL* (one of Luke's favorites) is found in vv. 43a, 43b, 48b.

What ties the four units into a whole is the failure of the disciples: they cannot cast out the demon (1. vv.37-43a), miss the meaning of Jesus' passion (2. vv.43b-45), reflect the culture's obsession with status (2' vv.46-48), and seek to control others as if they were protecting a franchise (1' vv.49-50). Luke edits his source (Mark 9:14-41) to demonstrate that the disciples - despite long exposure to Jesus and earlier success (9:1-11) - are not yet prepared to be his ambassadors. The long journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:28) provides remediation before the crisis of death and resurrection. That the church preserved the failures of its leaders is a reminder we are all faulty followers. Only one hero on this team! To follow Jesus guarantees exposure of our flaws because we walk in his reflected light. If you want to look good, or if unbroken success and a shining persona is your goal, find someone else to follow! It won't work here.

The first story (1. vv.37-43a) is a complex healing that opens and closes with a description of the problem (a. vv.37-39) and the cure (a' vv.42-43). In between are the failure of the disciples (b. v.40) and Jesus' censure (b' v.41). While Jesus and the three have been wrapped in a theophany, the nine have failed in front of a crowd. Mountain-top experiences change their participants, but not anything else, especially life in the valley. That the transfiguration is to be contrasted with their failure is indicated in the opening line, "On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met them...." A desperate father describes his only son's dilemma in language that resembles epileptic seizures of the *grand mal* variety, which today would be treated with anti-convulsants and perhaps oblation surgery. But here the etiology- on which Jesus, the father, and the disciples agree- is demonic, and here we must be careful. Demonization is a diagnosis of last resort, and to heap upon seizure patients an unwarranted spiritual burden is cruel and unnecessary. In Jesus' presence the spirit demonstrates his cruelty and is dismissed with a command; the boy is healed and returned to his father (v.42). Satan's work is demolished and God's majesty in Jesus' compassion is displayed (v.43). The disciples do not look good. They failed.

At the center of our faith is the paradox that a Jesus who shares divine power to overcome disease, death and demons lays aside that privilege when it comes to his protection. He will defeat his visible and invisible enemies not with the power of brute force but with the power of voluntary surrender, "for the Son of man is *to be delivered* (= by God) into the hands of men." This is contrary to the disciples' deepest hopes for personal and national vindication, and they just *do not get it* for several interlaced reasons (v.45).

In a culture which valued honor and avoided shame, the issue of who had the most status was a competitive sport (v.46). That Jesus knows their thoughts is evidence of his prophetic status. In that world children had no status and increased no one's accumulation of honor. That Jesus places a child in the place of ultimate honor (*his side*) turns the game upside down. The friendship of Jesus and the presence of his Father are found in the experience of receiving *in his name* those he sends. To see the world through his eyes and act accordingly demonstrates kingdom values, true greatness. John's complaint (v.49) is further demonstration the disciples think in terms of privilege and control. But in this battle with evil, Jesus is not a turf-protector, and they need all the friends they can get (v.50). There's room for all!

ONE HERO ON THIS TEAM

*“O faithless and perverse generation,
how long am I to be with you and bear with you?”*

The ruthless honesty and holy frustration of Jesus.

LUKE 9:41

Schutt Sports is a major supplier of helmets for the National Football League all the way down to high schools. Joey Adams sells them at Greenwood Supply, so you can go check out for yourself what I’m about to say. If you go to the Schutt website, you’ll find a warning label on all helmets and on their homepage it’s in all caps, probably at the request of their attorneys and insurance company:

“WARNING! NO HELMET SYSTEM CAN PREVENT CONCUSSIONS OR ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SERIOUS HEAD OR NECK INJURIES WHILE PLAYING FOOTBALL.”

The warning label continues with information about the symptoms of concussions and concludes with a startling statement of the obvious:

“TO AVOID THESE RISKS [OF PLAYING FOOTBALL], DO NOT ENGAGE IN THE SPORT OF FOOTBALL.”¹

I wonder if a similar warning needs to be issued by the church:

“WARNING! YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENTER AN ONGOING COSMIC CONFLICT FOR YOUR SOUL AND THE LIVES OF ALL PEOPLE. THE OUTCOME IS NOT IN DOUBT, BUT BETWEEN HERE ARE THERE THE WARFARE CONTINUES AT HIGH COST. TO AVOID THE RISKS OF FOLLOWING JESUS, DO NOT ENGAGE IN CHRISTIANITY!”

¹ PreachingToday.com search under Luke 9:37-50.

I like the idea. It's honest, not the silly marketing pitch about following Jesus and everything going great all the time. Then I remembered we already have just such a warning label, our first baptismal vow, the first question we ask before a new Christian is made: "Do you *renounce* the spiritual forces of wickedness, *reject* the evil powers of this world, and *repent* of your sin?"² Strong, forceful verbs: *renounce*, *reject*, *repent*. **I Do** says the candidate or their sponsor. I say No to the invisible spiritual wickedness *up there*; I say No to the corruptions and pressures of a fallen culture *out there* as they seek to squeeze me into their mold; I say No to the reality of sin and rebellion *in here*, in my own heart. I say a big No to all forces that resist God, and most especially the ones inside me where I have a vote. The church does not first ask you to say Yes to Christ but a firm No to all that opposes God. It is this comprehensive No at all level that creates the space for a larger Yes to Jesus, which is our third baptismal vow. But the first thing the church wants to know is, Do you understand our map of reality, and are you willing to fight at all three levels until you are carried off the battlefield? That's a pretty strong warning.

On the basis of divine revelation in Jesus and Scripture, the church sees and defines the world not as a pleasant playground but as a complex battlefield. We do not live in the delights of the kingdom of God, at least not yet, though we have glimmers of its bright beauty and hints of its awesome authority. We now live on a battleground where everyone is continually probed and attacked, and we are all the more vulnerable because we are internally compromised and weakened by our histories of sin and rebellion. We are weak, frail, and easily deceived. It's not a safe place to live. We need a big, strong friend.

One of the reasons I most admire Roman Catholics is their commitment to stand firm against some of the cherished intellectual fads of the modern world, one of which is a denial of spiritual evil. Evil is not merely an absence of the good like a hole in a shirt; evil is not a literary myth to give spooky characters to children's stories; evil is not the dark side of God as in the yin and the yang of some Eastern religions and Jungian psychology; evil is not just another name for the personification of human sin writ large, not just another way we talk about ourselves. Evil has an independent organizing intellect and personal spiritual focus in the world. Evil is a sobering reality with temporary ontological status, which is a way of saying it's real but limited and not the equal of God. One day the big pest will be removed, and in

² *U.M. Hymnal*, 34.

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Jesus we get a preview of that future. There is no eternal standoff between good and evil, no ultimate dualism, though at ground level the conflict is ongoing with genuine casualties all the way to the end of the age.

There is one who delights in pain, who clouds the mind in order to block the light, one who knows your weak points and exploits them, one whose sharpest tools are deception and half-truths, who always makes bad things worse, who inflames your appetites and bends them to your own shame and destruction, who appeals to the worst in us by claiming to offer a better deal than the God who made us. There is one who hates Jesus Christ and all his followers. This is the one who inspired Herod to kill the baby boys of Bethlehem, who met Jesus in his forty days of wilderness temptations, who engaged him time and again in his public ministry, who entered the open door of Judas' heart, who orchestrated the opposition that conspired to put Jesus on a cross, and who himself was put on notice in Jesus' resurrection that his days are numbered. If this character is removed from the cast, the entire play is altered.

With certain qualifications to rule out misunderstandings and silly cartoonish portrayals, classic Christianity has always taught that the devil, a fallen angel of high rank, truly exists and that every follower of Christ is part of an ongoing struggle against an array of complex and subtle spiritual forces that find delight in twisting and destroying all that God has made good at every level of creation. What vandalism is to fine art, that is what Satan and his hordes are to human beings and the cultures we create. Nothing creative about them, only defacement and defilement, deception and destruction. Years ago Pope Paul VI spoke for the Christian tradition:

“The question of the devil and the influence he can have on individual persons as well as communities, whole societies or events, is a very important chapter of Catholic doctrine... It is a departure from the picture provided by biblical and church teaching to refer to the devil's existence... as a pseudo-reality, a conceptual and fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes.... the Church has no intention...of proposing an alternative explanation which would be more acceptable to reason. Its desire is simply to remain faithful to the gospel and its requirements.”³

³ Quoted in Pat Collins CM, *Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Dublin, Ireland: Columba Press, 1999), 170-171.

I have seen the shadow of evil in the pastoral care of a man battling a video-poker addiction that threatened to destroy his life, in a woman who invested decades in the occult because of her disappointment with God, in the resistance of God’s own people to the gospel, in the arrogance of those who rail against God because of some perceived slight, and in the pattern of my own thoughts and temptations. I have felt the chilling presence and seen his tracks laid in blood and the bondage of addiction, in poverty and pain and confusion. Not a day goes by I am not made more aware, not only of my own continuing power for sin, but of the pervasive influence of the Evil One. This is no cartoon character to be easily dismissed, but a dark angelic personality let loose over the world whose turf Jesus came to invade and whose work Jesus came to utterly displace and ultimately destroy in his voluntary suffering and glorious resurrection, because when you absorb into yourself the world’s blind rage of sin in the cross, and when you overcome your enemy’s final weapon, which is death, in resurrection, then you have defeated him and changed everything.

The encounters that dot the Gospels are skirmishes in larger spiritual war in which we participate, whether we like it or not, whether we know how to name it or not.⁴ The world, as Jesus described it, is a cosmic battleground with real casualties and permanent consequences. Look around you. Read the papers. Look at the stinky sludge that bubbles up out of your own heart and in your unguarded dreams. Something complex and deep is wrong with us and our world, deeper and more complex than what we humans alone can account for, even at our worst. Only Satan could cook up something as anti-Semitic and devastating as the Holocaust. Beyond all the historians and sociologists and psychologists and economists and theoreticians can explain, there is a layer of explanatory power reserved to the church of Jesus Christ through divine revelation because we have been given true insight into what goes on behind the scenes; Jesus showed it to us. His life and teachings, his conflicts and victories, are the deep map of reality, and that map includes a terrible foe.

Much of what we struggle against are own sins, frailties, and ignorance, but beyond the power of our local rebellions against God are background forces that exploit and magnify our sin. We may lacerate ourselves and others, but it is the Evil One who adds the infection so that healing is long and difficult and sometimes even turns the wound into a consuming gangrene. One moment anger and the next death:

⁴ Two accessible introductory treatments are Dennis McCallum, *Satan And His Kingdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 2009); Tom White, *The Believer’s Guide to Spiritual Warfare* (Venture, CA: Regal, 2011).

who inspired the rapid escalation? Who added fuel to the fire and laughed at the explosion? Hear what Albert Einstein wrote, “The real problem is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirits of man.”⁵ This is not primitive naivete; it is not a lack of psychological or sociological sophistication; it is biblical realism that gives a convincing account of the world in which we live. This world is a beautiful and mysterious gift, but it is not safe because it is compromised from top to bottom and patrolled by a general and troops who are the cruel keepers of a prison camp. Into this camp we have been born, and it is inside the walls of our stockade that Jesus appears as a helpless baby, there to lay low for thirty years until his public unveiling and the launch of his kingdom freedom movement. He enters flesh for our freedom.

One of the great weaknesses of the theology and practices of our mainline churches is in this area. It is good to train pastors in the counseling techniques of psychology; it is also good to train us in the spiritual practices of discernment and prayer and the power of spiritual gifts. No one is prepared for the care of souls who cannot move below the surface of life to discern whether an inspiration or impulse is from the Holy Spirit and thus to be obeyed, from the human spirit and to be understood, or from an evil spirit and to be resisted.⁶ And what I have learned of the later in order to survive in the trenches I have learned outside official and approved sources. Pastors rarely talk about this stuff in public for fear of ridicule, only in private with friends you already trust. The prevailing intellectual climate in our denomination is allergic to biblical realism about evil. But I would rather trust the Lord Jesus and the center of the Christian tradition on this issue than all the modern philosophers, psychiatrists, and theologians who tells me that Jesus was mistaken, merely a man like others trapped in the thought forms of his own times, and that we have moved beyond such silly superstitions in the modern world. I don’t think so. It doesn’t match up with Scripture or my pastoral experience.

So in the lifelong process of sanctification, of being made like Jesus in my responses to the world, we must have wisdom about both sin and evil, how they differ and how they feed one another. And since we are up against such pervasive and subtle forms of deception and corruption both within and without, we should not be

⁵ Albert M. Wells, editor, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 65.

⁶ These three categories are from St. Ignatius of Loyola classical work on discernment, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

surprised when we meet so much failure in the church, but it is a failure because we are in the right battle if that's any consolation.

It is a sobering for me to face the fact that, even after being with Jesus in such an intimate fashion for years, the disciples are spiritual wimps, blind to a suffering Messiah, engaged in silly games of one-upmanship, and both envious and controlling of those outside their immediate circle. This is not an optimistic passage if you focus on the disciples. Luke presents four failures in a row. Why doesn't Jesus just fire them and start over, like Boards of Trustees do with college coaches and some churches do with pastors? Because these are the ones the Father gave him after prayer, and he has years invested in them. A new bunch would not be any better, different resumes but the same raw materials. People just like us! So if the Christian life is for you tied up with categories of success and looking better and better, you will find today's text difficult. But if you are convinced that following Jesus is not about looking good but about him exposing us at the deepest levels of our darkness to his love and light, then you will find consolation. You are now in the company of the apostles who often got it wrong and had their worst moments preserved for us to read two thousand years later. As I wrote at the top of today's bulletin, "If image management is dear to you, following Jesus could be a big downer!" He did not come to enhance your resume; instead, he came to rescue you.

A Failed Exorcism (vv.37-43a)

On top of the mountain three disciples have been saturated in the glory of Jesus' transfiguration: Peter, James and John. Now here they are, coming down with Jesus the next morning. But in the valley is not a glimpse heaven but a preview of hell and nine embarrassed disciples who've just failed in front of a large crowd despite their best efforts. A tormented world faces an impotent church. Quite contemporary I'd say, to my own embarrassment. Earlier when Jesus sent them out they'd been successful in such cases, but not now!⁷ Are they operating outside their authority? Had they worked up a formula to use rather than trust the immediacy of the Spirit's gifts? What Jesus found after his prayer retreat is a mess. Perhaps this a tougher opponent, a higher rank of spirit, and they were out of their league.

In spiritual ministry, meaning face-to-face prayer with hurting people, you

⁷ 9:1-10.

quickly learn you can be a hero one minute, a speed bump the next.⁸ From the opening verses I learn that one part of the church can be bathed in glory while another part, at the same time, can be in a losing spiritual battle right next door. You go on a retreat and are refreshed by the Spirit, but when you get home to your family, guess what? They haven't changed, maybe even declined a bit! And when you tell them how great the glow was on the mountain-top, they write you off as some sort of nut case. Hear the father's report to Jesus, "And I begged your disciples to cast it out, and they could not." It's no fun when your failures are made public.

Most commentators title this story, "An Epileptic Boy Healed."⁹ That is a medically influenced title since epilepsy and other seizure disorders were not scientifically understood in the ancient world. The symptoms our desperate dad describes approximate a grand male seizure: sudden onset, loud cries, convulsions, foaming and violent contortions. But Jesus and the father use a different set of non-scientific spiritual diagnostic categories. The father says a spirit is the source, and Jesus agrees in commanding it to leave with a prayer of rebuke.¹⁰ They share a world view that included not only physical but also spiritual causation. Luke is clear that Jesus "healed the boy" which leaves me with an interesting set of questions. What is the relationship between medical and spiritual diagnostics? Most seizure disorders can be medically explained by a neurologist and treated with drugs or surgery. I'm thankful because the world is broken at that level, and we need help. In some the body's electrical system misfires to create brain storms with dramatic side effects. Just this week I was on the phone with a friend who recently had two unexplained seizures, one in an airport, the other in a hospital, and my question was, "Are you taking your anti-seizure medications? Do you have money for it? I can help if you don't. How much are you drinking?" I am a modern realist.

⁸ On the experiential side of praying with folk, see the account of Rick Evans, a Vineyard pastor, *Ministry Time* (Rick Evans, 2013).

⁹ So Burton Throckmorton, *Gospel Parallels* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1979), 92.

¹⁰ For an historical assessment of Jesus the exorcist, see Darrell Bock, *Who Is Jesus? Linking the Historical Jesus With The Christ of Faith* (New York, NY: Howard Books, 2012), Chapter 6 by Craig Evans, "Jesus And Exorcism: Authority, the Kingdom of God, and Cosmic Forces," 79-92; on the early church as Jesus' successor, see Graham Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), especially Chapter 6, "Luke-Acts," 129-155.

But are there also similar phenomena that may occur when people are carrying demonic entities within themselves? Apparently so, as is the case before us where the spirit responded violently to Jesus' holy presence. So the wise Christian will always use the resources of medicine eagerly and without apology since the doctors are God's friends and their science an insight from above. But we are also free to ask in certain circumstances where there is other evidence, Is there something else here as well? Sometimes medical alone, sometimes spiritual alone, sometimes both layered within one another because of our appreciation of human complexity. To attach stigma to seizures, as has been the case historically till just recently because of the naive misreading of this text, is understandable but still wrong and adds suffering and shame to what's already difficult. Be wary of easy labels and quick fixes; they are often wrong and rarely help. The boy was restored by the love of the Father flowing through the Son Jesus in the power of the Spirit. It was a Trinitarian preview of the world's future in God's kingdom, and if it happened once because this is how the world is structured so as to be open to God's amazing touch, it can happen again. And whether you see the diagnosis as medical or spiritual, or some combination of the two, Jesus healed him by removing what was wrong. A misfiring ganglia or a menacing spirit? How would you know the difference anyway since they are different levels of causation, only one of which can be measured? A boy was restored. His spirit, his body, his family and his community are all involved, then this great line, verse 43, "And all were astonished at the majesty of God." When I see God move, I want to sing, "Praise God, from whom all blessing flow...."

This is why the spiritual gift of discernment is so valuable, and why those who pray for healing work best in teams that combine medical, psychological, and spiritual insights. In the church we are free to use all the tools God has given, and if the church has recently neglected some of her own tools, then we can dust them off and put them to use again. The boy was healed with a word. You can't fit that into a purely scientific worldview. Invisible power, visible results. God's love moving into a tormented body to evacuate evil and restore function. It still happens, but it is not under our control, which helps explain the failure of the disciples. When we work with the Lord, good things happen. But when we operate independently or on the basis of pious wishes, little or nothing happens, and we get to look stupid in front of people, just like the disciples. I find it fascinating that the story as told by Luke does not blame either the father or the boy, only the disciples. Telling people they lack faith is a form of cruelty and Christian malpractice. That so little of spiritual healing and deliverance happens in our churches today is not the fault of the sick and tormented and not the fault of those who bring them; if you must lay the blame

somewhere, lay it at the feet of us pastors who are so little skilled in listening to and cooperating with the Lord in the invisible realm. We've not been trained; there are few models, and the recent theology of the church has all but excluded the supernatural and mystical elements of the gospel. We are all starting over, and there are few teachers in our own ranks. We will have to turn to the Charismatics, Pentecostals and Roman Catholics to mentor us. The fact that our *Book of Worship* now contains models for healing services is at least a start.

With us anger is always tinged with sin, but not so with Jesus. In The Sinless One anger was a pure and unpolluted flame of holy passion directed against whatever stood in the way of God's goodness. Jesus was angry in the presence of evil that brought so much pain to this boy and his father. He was angry at the impotence of his disciples. Perhaps the crowds as well. He was angry that God's people had so little confidence in the Father's love and power, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?" How long? No much longer. Jerusalem is just ahead. But immediately after this burst of wrath there comes the impulse of compassion, "Bring your son here." Jesus could move from one pure emotion to the next without the clutter and confusion we experience. Holy wrath. Holy compassion. One right after the other. Amazing clarity and focus.

The only way to learn spiritual ministry, and by that I mean ministry in cooperation with the person and gifts of the Holy Spirit, is to try and fail. The church is not the Lord, and more often than not we fail. But at least the disciples tried. At least they waded in over their heads and gave it a shot. They were in the game and not on the sidelines. So what if they failed? So what if they were humiliated? So what if the worst about them is written down in Scripture? They made a decision of faith. They would rather fail with Jesus learning his stuff than succeed at anything else- fishing or tax collecting or whatever else they were doing before he interrupted their lives. That's a tough decision, and one I wrestle with all the time. What is success in ministry? There's only one hero on this team, and it's not the disciples.

Misunderstanding The Messiah (vv.43b-45)

The second failure of the disciples, and it follows immediately on the heels of the first, is their blindness to the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. You'd think that one with power to cast out demons would also have the horsepower necessary to free the nation of Israel and restore their political fortunes. But while everyone was marveling at God's work in his servant, Jesus put a different word in the disciples'

ears. “Let it sink in deeply,” he said, “like seeds in the soil. This gospel train is not headed where you think. It’s headed towards a train wreck. At some point I will give up all power, ‘for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men.’ I will appear helpless, and you will not be able to rescue me in that hour. I am to be killed, and it is the Father’s will, the only way to reverse the tide of history.”

I see a threefold downward movement here. From the glory of the transfiguration on the mountain down into the valley and the struggle of evil and failure, then further down towards Jerusalem and death itself. Not until Jesus freely enters the very pit of human suffering and dies will he be in position to free us from the worst of the afflictions of evil. The epileptic boy would one day die. So would his father. Not until Jesus has taken death into his own body will he be able to mock its power in the resurrection. But the disciples do not understand. The time is not yet; it’s hidden from them. This is one of those words of Jesus that cannot be understood until after the fact. A Messiah who comes to freely die is a mystery, a divine truth not to be pierced by reason alone. It’s not what anyone expected.

The Lure Of Comparison (vv.46-48)

Twenty-five years ago I remember watching a pink *Roto-Rooter* truck come to a neighbor’s home in Columbia. “Once in very week Drano in every drain” had not worked, and so the man with the machine was called. He threaded his mechanical Pac-man into the pipes and chewed away the blockage. Out came a sock, the shreds of a disposable diaper, and a load of foul smelling gook. “That must have been there before we bought the house,” the woman replied.

“But lady,” the man countered, “me and my partner were here only six months ago.”

“Oh, then I guess it is mine, isn’t it?”

I tried unsuccessfully to keep a straight face, then a thought intruded, “I have to do this for my people from time to time, including you, Pastor Phil.”

Claiming your own gook is not easy, particularly in the church where we all want to look better than we really are. After all, we’re all good Christians here; we’re not supposed to have any gook, at least not any that truly stinks. Anybody believe that? It’s no fun to have your gook dredged up in front of your neighbors, but that’s exactly what Jesus does with his closest followers. It shows how out of touch they were that when he speaks about his coming death they begin to argue with one another about who’s the greatest and who gets the Secretary of State slot when King

Jesus takes the throne.¹¹ Not one of their finer moments.

Luke takes care to highlight in verse 47 Jesus’ spiritual gift of knowledge. He was not within earshot, but the Holy Spirit was and reported back. And that is the genius of Jesus the teacher. He goes to the heart of any issue because he knows, “But when Jesus *perceived the thoughts of their hearts...*” The Lord hears your public and private words, knows your thoughts and the motivations from which they spring. Have you ever thought that the circumstances of your life are a curriculum designed to deal with what he knows about us that we do not know about ourselves?

Children were of low status in the ancient world and added no honor to any gathering of adults.¹² It is a mistake to sentimentalize what Jesus does as if it was a statement about his regard for the status of neglected or supposedly innocent children. It’s also a mistake to turn it into a moral lesson that one *ought* to spend time with the little ones, whether child or adult, because that is where Jesus is found, true as that might be. The language here is the technical language of *sending* and *receiving*, of receiving a commission as an official representative of a superior. In choosing a child, one with no status at all, Jesus is saying he chooses whoever he will, and if he chooses a child as his apostle, then whoever receives that child in his name gets not only benefits from Jesus but also from the one who sent him, the heavenly Father himself. The greatness is in his choice, not the recipient.

The status of the disciples is not independently established. They were nobodies in the world’s eyes when Jesus chose them, and apart from his commission they return to that status. Wrangling with one another is a dead end because whatever status they have comes from him, not from one another. If he didn’t send you, it doesn’t matter how great you seem to be to yourself or others. And if he did send you, it’s a matter of his greatness, not yours. Spiritual competition stinks in the nose of Jesus. And yet how to root it out of my own heart I do not know. Our culture is so full of the values of individualism and competitiveness that to disengage from its toxic effects seems almost impossible. But then we have an extraordinary teacher in Jesus, so perhaps there’s hope? “For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.” But I’m a lot like the disciples; I want Jesus to enhance my resume.

¹¹ Acts 1:1-11.

¹² David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 404.

Not a pretty picture so far is it? Beaten by a demon in front of a crowd, more impressed by power than by the coming suffering of the Messiah, arguing with one another about which one of them is the greatest. Failure, failure, failure. The worst about them is coming to light; a purging is in progress.

It's not uncommon in our walk with Christ for some victory or illumination to be followed by a time of deep exposure. When the saints confess they are worse than others it's not false humility; it's that they've been more deeply probed than others. They see the inward corruption and gook hidden from others. It's the necessary removal of illusions. The false self is exposed and humiliated that the true self, rooted in God's grace, may emerge.¹³ This, at least, is part of what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. If looking competent is a high value for you, as it is for me, I don't recommend this process. It is brutal in its thoroughness and like a great spiral continues til we die. But there is a fourth and final episode. First impotent, second blind, third foolish, and now petty. How's that for a course in apostolic self-esteem? Jesus cares for more their character than their reputation. First time I heard that it scared me to death. Still does. Jesus does not exist to enhance our self-worth or self-image but to rebuild both on a different foundation.

A Narrow Spirit Of Control (vv.49-51)

When *our way* becomes the *only way* and *our group* the *only group*, something's wrong; we've missed the grand and mysterious scope of God's work in the world. And particularly with spiritual ministry, with the freely blowing winds of the Holy Spirit, you cannot control or contain it within any denominational or organizational structure. It keeps breaking out in new ways. God will always find someone to do his work, even if they don't meet our standards. Don't forget that we Methodists started out as one of those despised fringe groups. Only later did we attain respectability and build a little English cathedral here in Greenwood.

A Methodist colleague once asked me what I thought of the way a local group of Baptists were doing evangelism. He thought they were a bit pushy and insensitive asking people if they were ready for heaven or not. My answer? "I like the way they're doing it better than the way we're not doing it." Yes, my answer was a bit harsh, but also in line with the spirit of Jesus who said to pick your enemies carefully,

¹³ See Albert Haase, O.F.M., *Coming Home To Your True Self: Leaving the Emptiness of False Attractions* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2008).

“Don’t forbid him, for he that is not against you is for you.”

The disciples had just failed miserably at dealing with a demon, and here they are complaining because someone else is doing it successfully without consulting them. They sound like little spiritual policemen, “Master, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, *because he does not follow with us.*” You know what I wish Jesus had said to them? “Well fellows, maybe you ought to go learn from him; your present track record is not very impressive.” What is it that makes us suspicious of other Christians who may not do it just our way?

In case you haven’t heard, fewer and fewer Americans care one whit about denominational loyalty. When people move they don’t typically ask, Where is a church of my denomination? They ask, Where is God at work? Where is something happening that takes God to explain? Who has the best youth and children’s program? Those who count on denominational loyalty fish in a shrinking pond. The riches of the whole church are ours, and if God is blessing some other group with conversions or healings or teaching or praise or marital healing or racial reconciliation, I want us to be big enough to go and learn from them. I refuse to live in a little religious ghetto where we are suspicious of everyone who doesn’t do it our way. Apparently Jesus is pretty big-hearted about this stuff. He likes people doing his stuff in his name, even if they don’t match our profile. And if he doesn’t have a problem, neither should we. He wants the work done, and if we don’t do it he will send someone else, a child perhaps, or a lone exorcist, maybe even a Pentecostal.

CONCLUSION

Verse 51, “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” A bunch a failures following a young prophet stubbornly headed towards an inevitable death. That is where Luke leaves us. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote these startling words, “Christianity, from Golgotha onwards, has been the sanctification of failure.”¹⁴ That doesn’t sell well these days, does it? Follow Jesus, and you get to look bad in front of everyone, just like the early guys. Impotent, blind, ego-driven and petty. It looks pretty unattractive, until I consider the alternative, which is for all that dark stuff to stay in me unexposed and to rot my very soul unawares. No thank you. Better to deal with the light a little at a time now in the compassionate presence of Jesus rather than all at once at the end.

¹⁴ Hughes, *1001*, 147.
