

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 9:38-50

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

This story and its impact are definitively shaped by the meaning of one word: *skandalizo*, *scandala*. This word is a verbal thread that runs through the story. In the NRSV it is translated as "stumble": "If your hand causes you to stumble" and "If your foot causes you to stumble." *Scandala* is translated as stumbling stone or block. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones." These sayings refer to the exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus' name and the disciples forbid him. A preferable translation builds on the meaning of *skandalizo* as "to be scandalized, to be offended." The *scandalon* was a stone that a person stumbled on and then cursed. It was what caused that person to be scandalized. Thus a scandal in English means an event or action that causes offense.

In this case it refers to the disciples being offended and scandalized by this other exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Therefore, what needs to be communicated in telling this story is the irritation of the disciples. They were really ticked at that other exorcist. John's statement needs to communicate their offense: "Teacher, we saw someone else casting out demons and we stopped him because he wasn't following us." The NRSV translates this as "tried to stop him." There is no implication in the Greek that they only "tried." The tone of John here is one who is proud of a successful defense.

Jesus' response is, in effect, "Don't stop him." Then he goes on to explain what one should do in order not to be scandalized by other people who follow other people—who are competitors in one way or another. Jesus is talking about how you deal with people who are other than "us," but who are doing basically the same work, the same things. They are other people in the religious tradition.

What is going on in the rest of this discourse is a graphic metaphor to emphasize the extent to which one should go in order to avoid being scandalized and scandalizing others. Thus, Jesus says, "If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to be scandalized, to stumble, to be offended, then it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea," and "If your hand then causes you to be offended, cut it off."

These statements are about the extent you should go to avoid being scandalized by other people who take different approaches to the faith tradition, to exorcism, or to healings. It is an important word in our time as well, when the church and religious communities are divided by people being scandalized and offended by different positions in relation to homosexuality, liturgy, church organization, the roles of women, and so on. There are all sorts of reasons that people find to be scandalized about what happens in religious communities.

Jesus' concluding words are directed at that phenomenon. Everyone will be salted with fire (that is, tested), so salt is good. Be salty. You have different opinions, so disagree and debate, but be at peace with one another. This is about the way to peace between different religious communities and the avoidance of exacerbating conflicts, being scandalized by what other parts of the religious community do. It is a word that Protestants need in relation to Catholics and Catholics in relation of Protestants, evangelicals in relation to mainline, and so on. This is a story that is directed to all religious communities in relation to the extent to which we need to go in order not to be scandalized by each other. Offense and scandal happen in local churches, between various factions within the same denomination, between different denominations and churches, and between Christians and Jews and Muslims. According to Jesus, we should take strong steps to avoid being scandalized by others who are not "one of us."

The tone for telling is Jesus pleading with the disciples. His plea is couched in a radical metaphor. He is saying, "This is what extent you should go: If your hand causes you to stumble, to be scandalized by what other people do, cut it off. Better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go into hell." Hell is the place of conflict, the place of warfare. It is the place in which people are consumed by fire—the fire of conflict and warfare. I suggest that you tell this as a story about conflict in the church and of Jesus confronting the disciples when they were deeply offended at one who was casting out demons in his name, but who was not part of their group.