

**PSALM 124**

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side  
—let Israel now say—  
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,  
when our enemies attacked us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was kindled against us;  
then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone  
the raging waters.*

*Blessed be the LORD,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth.  
We have escaped like a bird  
from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped.*

*Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.*

In the preamble to this morning's Gospel reading the disciples and Jesus are passing through Galilee where "Jesus mentions for the second time, the human hands that will kill him, the three days he will be dead, and how he will rise again. Clueless, the disciples are too afraid to ask any more questions. Instead, the twelve turn things back towards themselves, debating which one is the smartest, the tallest, best crowd controller, most articulate pray-er, the apple of Jesus eye. Caught in the act, Jesus silences their comparisons by plopping a child down in their midst. Anyone who wants to be at the front of the line, he tells them, must first stand at the back. Whoever can welcome this tiny creature, welcomes me and far more than me – the One who sent me."

"Unwilling to let a toddler steal the show, John jumps at the chance to earn a few brownie points..."<sup>1</sup>

**Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)**

*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 afterwards 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.*

*'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. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.' And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

*'For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'*

## The Word of the Lord...

Our closing hymn this morning was not chosen for the familiarity of its tune, but rather for its powerful words. A sampling:

Help us accept each other As Christ accepted us;  
Teach us as sister, brother, Each person to embrace.  
Be present, Lord, among us And bring us to believe.  
We are ourselves accepted And meant to love and live.

Let Your acceptance change us, So that we may be moved  
In living situations To do the truth in love;  
To practice Your acceptance Until we know by heart  
The table of forgiveness And laughter's healing art.

We are just one big happy family! Isn't that what this Sunday is all about?

The worship notes from the denomination seem to think so:

On World Communion Sunday, Christians from around the world gather in worship to partake of the elements of bread and wine in remembrance and celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is also the time to bear witness to the unity of Christians everywhere as we seek to live out Christ's command to work for justice and peace in a world that is deeply divided in conflict and war. As we gather on this Lord's Day, let us remember and pray for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s 165 partner communions and other organizations worldwide who will be receiving Communion.

What a blessing it is to be entrenched in such a community of faith.

"A strong community enhances the lives of its members.

The community is a place of identity, where people have a sense of belonging because they are known and recognized.

The community provides protection and support.

The community shapes values and provides cultural norms."

"But there are risks in a strong community.

The past ways may not be suitable for the challenges of the future.

A strong community may be so focused on itself that it loses the capacity to relate to those outside."<sup>2</sup>

Hmmmm..... community, good? Community, bad?

I was told during a recent keynote given by the current Moderator of the PCUSA, Bruce Reyes-Chow, that my role in the church may very well be to help bridge that gap between modern and post-modern – very broadly and simply put – between structure and Spirit.

So apparently I am the one with the answers about community since I am that bridge.... Except... I too get caught up in the crosshairs of expectations and demands and truth be told... I kinda like them. I have been protected and supported by this community and appreciate the values that hold me accountable. I like my long, black robe and the comfort it gives me.

Sometimes... (shhh, this could get my post-modern card taken away from me)... sometimes I like that we haven't done it that way before.

So community, good? Or community, bad – clearly I don't have the answers.

I'm in good company though, because John doesn't have the answers either. Poor guy is just trying to gain some street cred with the prophet he's been hanging out with and next thing he knows he is being bombarded with images of drownings, bloody stumps and infernos.

*'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. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.' And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

Where do we put ourselves when we hear this passage?

Are we the community of faith, banding together in order to better blast our way through this secular humanist culture we live in, forging a path towards truth and eternal life?

Or are we the community of faith, binding together into a huge stumbling block keeping those who can't say the magic words of tenets and creeds from joining the feast?

What mistakes have we tragically made in our haste to prune those sinners back?

How often is our fall-back position in effect amputational theology?

Don't like gay marriage? Cut them off!

Don't like paying for other people's healthcare? Cut them off!

Don't like the way a family member does things? Cut them off!

Even internally – don't like the way the church does something? Cut them off!

Don't like something a member of the staff did? Cut them off!

Don't like the wording in the letter with the pledge card? Cut them off!

Cut! Cut! Cut!

But don't look down... because there is blood on our hands.

It's not the blood of the gay couple.

It's not the blood of the uninsured.

It's not even the blood of the church.

We've got the blood of our crucified Lord on our hands.

When we cut off members of our community we lose so much. We lose too much.

We lose integrity.

We lose balance.

We lose grace.

**This table has been set for all.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Shortlidge. *26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Mark 27, 2009, Mark 8:38-50*. The Well. Austin, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*. Harry B. Adams. "Mark 9:38-50: Pastoral Perspective." Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 116.