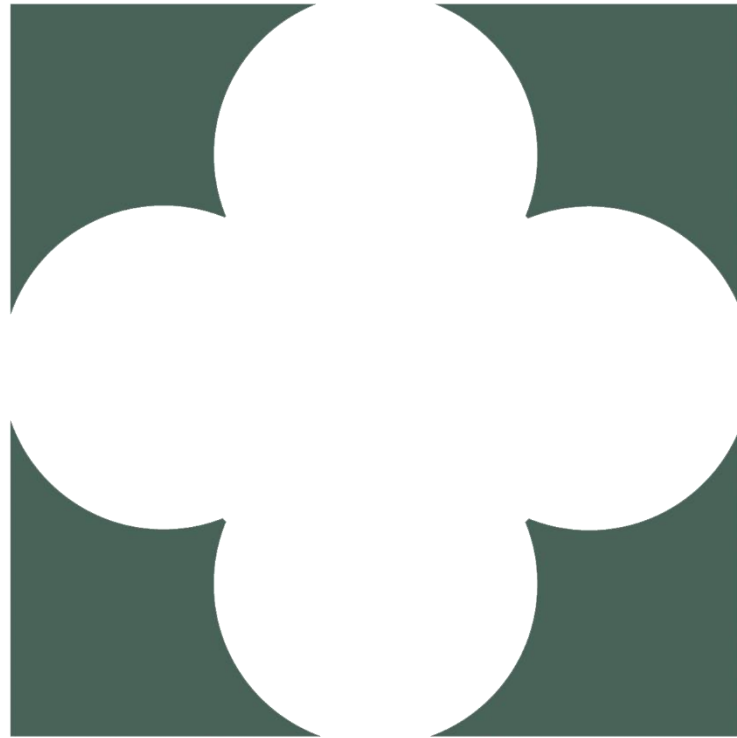


# Drawing Lines

Pastor Tim Phillips



seattle first baptist

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Mark 9:38-50

The lesson for today is Mark 9.38-50 and it is printed in the bulletin if you are here in the sanctuary. If you are at home, I hope you will grab your Bible or electronic device and follow along.

But before we get to the lesson, I want to read for you the verses that immediately precede it. You will see why later.

So here is Mark 9.35-37. The disciples have secretly been arguing about who is the greatest and Jesus says:

‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’  
36 Then he took a little child and put her among them; and taking her in his arms, he said to them, 37 ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

A “child” or “little one” is going to show up later in the reading that begins with verse 38: 38 John said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, we saw someone\* casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ 39 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. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 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.

42 ‘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. 43If 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.\* 45And 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.\*,\* 47And 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,\* 48where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 'For everyone will be salted with fire.\* 50Salt 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 God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

I'm not really sure how thankful we should be for this but there it is.

It has been 23 years since I have had to think about dating. Thank God! Because, depending on who you ask, I wasn't very good at it.

And part of the reason I probably wasn't very good at it was that I couldn't figure out how to discern what would make a good partner for me or me a good partner for someone else. I made checklists of what I wanted in a person. And that didn't work. I threw out the checklists and tried to just follow my heart. And that was disastrous.

And then I discovered that there were lines I was drawing – lines I didn't need to draw and lines I did.

Different culture? Absolutely fine.

Maybe doesn't like sports quite as much as I do? Probably fine.

Doesn't exactly match my politics? I could give it a shot.

But having been a victim of domestic violence, I drew a line at any hint of abusive language and violence. And maybe related to that, I drew a line at anyone who treated waitstaff badly. How you treat someone who is serving you says a lot about who you are.

I drew a line at smoking.

I drew a line at those who had a relentless hatred for the Church. A healthy skepticism was totally fine. But I drew the line at the kind of anger that consumes someone.

I discovered that there were lines I didn't need to draw and lines that I did in order to be true to myself and my unique value as a human being. Line that would give me the best chance of living in peace with a partner.

That's the "salt" in this text. Salt was of great value in that time because of its own unique properties. It had the power to heal and, in right proportions, grow things. Salt could make even simple food a feast and, in dire circumstances, it might even save your life.

So, Jesus closes this lesson with “have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

Before I go on, I have to say that the people who were on the other side of the lines I needed to draw were not bad people. Some of them were truly lovely. Some of them tempted me to tweak my lines a little bit. But I began to realize that what was at stake was my own sense of value and the kind of life I imagined.

“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another,” Jesus says.

But what comes before that is teaching about lines that don’t need to be drawn and those that do.

Now I know that drawing lines probably makes you nervous. It should. It makes me nervous. Drawing lines can be dangerous for other people and for ourselves. So, I want to be very clear this morning about what I am hearing in this text.

And I want to recognize and honor that we are mostly “circle people.” There’s that poem you probably recognize by Edwin Markham:

*He drew a circle that shut me out –*

*Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.*

*But Love and I had the wit to win:*

*We drew a circle that took him in!*

Perfect, right?

There's that great anthem the choir sings with words by Gordon Light and music by the great Mark Miller:

*No one stands alone,*

*We'll stand side by side.*

*Draw the circle,*

*Draw the circle wide.*

This is exactly right. We spend too much time on the lines we don't need to draw.

That's the first section of this lesson, verses 38-41. John tries to explain – perhaps a little too proudly – that the disciples tried to stop someone from healing people because he wasn't part of their group. The healer even did so in the name of Jesus.

And Jesus says, in effect, “Are you crazy? When people are being healed, don't stop them. Don't waste your time drawing those lines!”

And honestly, there are people and communities who seem to be doing the work of healing better than we do. Maybe they even do so in the name of Jesus.

There are churches with theologies and music and structures that are different than ours that are better at healing lives that are broken by shame and guilt and addictions.

There are communities that are committed in their own understanding to the way of Jesus and are much better than we are at racial reconciliation.

There are gatherings of people who are, on the whole, more attentive to the needs of one another than we are.

And I'll speak for myself. I think I have spent way too much time drawing lines that don't matter rather than embracing and celebrating the healing that people very different from me have been doing in the world.

If you need a concrete example, on this 20th remembrance of September 11, Harry Adams tells a story as a commentary on this text.

*Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, at an outdoor service at a baseball stadium in New York, prayers were offered by religious leaders from many different traditions. A group in the diocese of a bishop who participated in this service started a movement to depose him because by participating [in the event] he had recognized the legitimacy of the prayers of others.*

What? That's a line you want to draw?

Adams goes on to ask:

*How can a community keep its own identity and still be open to those outside? There is no simple answer to that question, but every community needs to be aware of where the line is drawn ...*

*and the impact that the decision of how to relate to others has on both those within and those without.*

And here's some behind the scenes drama of John's boast about trying to stop the healer. Just a few verses earlier, the disciples come upon a child who is dangerously possessed. He convulses, falls on the ground and sometimes throws himself into the fire, and foams at the mouth. You can imagine the father is distressed. And the disciples try to heal the child but they can't do it.

Jesus comes along, scolds the disciples, and heals the child, taking him by the hand and lifting him up.

So, you have to wonder if the lines the disciples are wanting to draw have to do with their own jealousy and bitterness that someone not of their group is able to do what they can't.

Beloved ones, the Kin-dom of God is bigger than us. And given the state of the world and our own lives, this is not the time for us to be wasting our time or energy drawing lines that don't need to be drawn, especially when we draw them out of a sense of shame about our own inadequacy.

Drawing "people lines" is not necessary.

Behavior lines. That's another thing. Jesus moves on in this lesson to some lines that need to be drawn. And they are pretty simple.

Put a stumbling block in the way of a "little one" and look out.



We were talking in Bible Study this week about who the Bible means by “little one” or “child.” In the Hebrew Bible, the kingdom was measured by how it treated widows and orphans – those who were vulnerable and often seen as not valuable. The gospels measure the kin-dom in the same way. “Child” is not age but agency; those who are seen as powerless and vulnerable at whatever age, those who are not considered to be worth anything because they have nothing to offer, those who don’t count.

I can’t get out of my mind that image of border patrol on horses rounding up Haitian refugees. There is one particular image of a patrol officer riding up on a little girl and almost running her down. The adult near her barely has time to pull her out of the way.

I don’t think Jesus would have a lot of good things to say about borders. After all, he spent most of his ministry crossing them.

But I have no problem imagining what he would say about that scene: “If you put a stumbling block or a hindrance in the way of these little ones ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown in the sea.”

I should tell you that your pastors and our president, on behalf of the Executive Committee, have joined our multi-faith partners of the Faith Action Network in a letter to demand that our government stop abusing Haitians at the border and to stop rejecting pleas for asylum by our Haitian siblings who are fleeing

death, gang violence, political unrest, natural disasters, and poverty in which our nation is deeply complicit. Just so you know, we American Baptists include a whole caucus of Haitian Baptists living in the U.S. So, this isn't just political for us. It's personal.

There is a line to be drawn. And Jesus draws it pretty drastically. Mess with the vulnerable and you might as well be dead.

And it's not only a line about how we treat others. There's a line to be drawn about how we use our own bodies. Do you use your body in such a way that obscures that "salt" – that power, that value, that potential for healing that lives in you? If there is some behavior that diminishes the beautiful, powerful, loving person you are, cut it off. If you let jealousy or bitterness or the illusions of your privilege get in the way of the person you imagine yourself to be, dismantle it. If you are letting that anxiety we are all experiencing rob you of your joy and keep you from the peace that surpasses our capacity and our need to understand, find a way to get rid of it!

As our Romney speaker, Rev. Sekou, said last week, you don't have to wait to understand in order to have peace. You don't have to wait to figure out what makes other people do what they do or be who they are. "Be at peace with one another," whether you get it or not.

After almost 13 years of our being together, I think we know each other pretty well. Some of us have known each other even

longer. We spent a couple years dating and discerning where some of our lines were. Students of ministry will tell you that there is usually a honeymoon period and I'm guessing – I think I know – that we are long past that by now. We have settled into a life together that has been bumpy at times and pretty disorienting for all of us at the moment because we are dismantling some lines and drawing new ones.

But I hope you know that, no matter what, I love you. And that even when I fail to do that well, there is a love that draws the circle wider than I can.

And beloved ones, that circle starts here. It starts with you and with me. It starts with standing side by side. It starts right now with how we welcome and serve and love and hold ourselves accountable to the vision we have of who we want to be as people and as a community.

Together, I hope that we can outwit the lines that don't need to be drawn and draw those lines that will bend toward those wider circles that invite us – that call us all – in.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES:

"Outwitted," by Edwin Markham. See [www.poetrynook.com/poem/outwitted](http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/outwitted). "Draw the Circle Wide," by Gordon Light and Mark Miller, 1994 Common Cup Company. Harry B. Adams on Mark 9.38-50, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, pp. 116-120.