

Sunday, September 26, 2021
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 (Year B)

Mark 9.38-50

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/375949987561512>

(Sermon begins at about 21:35)

“Have Salt in Yourselves”

The disciples really don't get it. They can't seem to help obsessing about how great they are, how special they are being Jesus' disciples. As you recall from last week, the disciples were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. Seeking to disabuse them of their petty, self-centered perspective, Jesus tells them that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk 9.35). To illustrate the point, "he took a child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'" (Mk 9.36-37).

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus continues his commentary using that same theme of welcoming. But not before the disciples get all upset that someone who is not part of the Twelve is casting out demons in Jesus' name. Notice what John specifically says: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us" (Mk 9.38). The implication is that the disciples don't want any competition to their status as followers of Jesus. Not only that, but they tried to stop the guy "because he was not following us." Following us? Since when did this go from being about following Jesus to following "us"? Talk about arrogance. Talk about not getting Jesus' message about greatness and service. This is evidenced not just in their words, but also in the fact that they are so upset that they, or rather John as their spokesman, dares to be so bold and arrogant as to interrupt Jesus' lesson condemning that very thing. Condemning the focus on greatness and instead commending them to be welcoming as a means of service.

In response, Jesus effectively tells the disciples to knock it off. That the important thing is that his message is being proclaimed, and by all accounts, is being proclaimed accurately and faithfully. It doesn't matter if it is done by Jesus, one of the Twelve, or someone who has a genuine passion for proclaiming the Gospel. As long as they are doing so faithfully. The end result is the same. That is all that matters. For Jesus, it is all about expanding the circle ever wider, to include more and more people in this ministry. It's about results, not about creating little fiefdoms. It's not about who gets the credit.

While the disciples don't appear to be getting the message, Jesus is able to use their shortsightedness as yet more material for teaching. He continues with the message he was delivering. You can almost hear the unspoken, "now as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted." He continues his teaching by warning against doing anything that would be a stumbling block to another, particularly "one of the least of these little ones" (Mk 9.42)—specifically referring to the child he still holds. He undoubtedly has in mind the disciples'

appalling behavior of arguing about who is greatest among them and of criticizing those who they view as not being one of them, even when those others are acting in ways that are clearly more in alignment with Jesus' values than the disciples are currently exhibiting. But how he goes about it—what he says about being a stumbling block to others and even in stumbling oneself—is a little startling, to say the least. With graphic images of drowning oneself with a heavy stone tied around one's neck, of cutting off hands and feet, of tearing out an eye.

The underlying message is clear. He is telling the disciples that as his followers, they need to be better than this. Better than arguing and criticizing and self-aggrandizing. They need to stop the finger-pointing and get their own house in order. As his followers, they are supposed to be setting an example as to what it means to live according to Jesus' teachings. And right now, they are not doing that very well. In fact, others—like this child or even like the stranger they were condemning earlier—will see the actions and attitudes of the disciples and get mixed messages. They will see the hypocrisy in what they are doing, in how they are—or are not—living the Gospel. And that's not going to do anything to help the cause. If anything, such hypocrisy could sink the whole endeavor if they are not careful.

Now, admittedly, the imagery he uses—particularly that of cutting off limbs and tearing out eyes—is a bit extreme. But as is often the case with Jesus, he tends to use hyperbole, extreme situations or examples, as a way of underscoring the seriousness of the issue at hand. In this case, that the threat posed by their actions—the possibilities that others will view them as a stumbling block and take away the wrong message—is incredibly serious. That it would be better for them to be maimed or disfigured than to continue to live in a manner inconsistent with the Gospel. Now, of course Jesus is not advocating that the disciples, or anyone for that matter, cut off a hand or a foot or tear out an eye. But in using these symbols—eyes and limbs that are obviously part of one's own body—Jesus is saying something about the source of the offending words and behaviors. That they are not from an external source, but arise from within. Their questionable or contrary behaviors are of their own doing and, therefore, they are responsible for taking corrective actions. In using the symbolism he does, Jesus is stressing the need to cut out of their lives those things that are problematic, that are contrary to the Gospel message, and that might prove to be a stumbling block to others.

Another important piece of imagery that Jesus employs is that he says it is better to go through life maimed than to continue as they are and to end up in hell. We need to understand that in Judaism at the time of Jesus, there was not a clear consensus on what happened to people after they died. Some thought you simply ceased to exist. Some thought you went to Sheol—the place of the dead—regardless of whether you were good or bad. Some thought good people would eventually be resurrected and bad people go to a place of torture. It is this latter image that Jesus is calling upon. But we need to recognize that it was not a formalized theology of the afterlife that Jesus was talking about. Jesus was actually referring to something right in their midst.

Hell is the Greek translation of an actual place that was called Gehenna in Latin. This referred to the valley of Hinnom, located just south of Jerusalem. In earlier times, this area was where foreign cults once held child sacrifices.¹ Because of these atrocities, it was a place that was viewed as evil, and as such, a place of shame that was to be avoided. By Jesus' time, this place

had become the city's garbage dump. It was the place where all the city's trash was collected and burned. It is reported that fires burned continually, giving rise to the image of eternal fire that eventually came to be associated with hell. As a result of the evils associated with child sacrifices and the continually burning trash fires, Gehenna, or hell "became associated in Jewish apocalyptic thought with death and eternal punishment for the unrighteous"² So, in using the image of hell in his teaching, Jesus would have been sending a not-so-subtle message to his disciples that their actions were shameful, as were the ancient cultic practices performed in that place. And also, that the disciples' actions were effectively garbage needing to be cast out and burned away.

Jesus recognizes that the self-discipline needed to faithfully live the Gospel is difficult work. Again, stated in a cryptic manner that we may not understand but the disciples would have. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (Mk 9.50b). Of course, salt is used to add zest, to add flavor, to food, as well as being used as a preservative. But salt had a particular religious use in ancient times. Because it is a preservative, it was often used in sacrifices as a sign that the sacrifice represented an unbreakable covenant or agreement.³ That the covenant or agreement would be preserved. Jesus is implying that this work of self-discipline, of rededication to the work of Gospel is one's sacrifice to God. Sacrifice of oneself. Sacrifice as in making a covenant with God. As one commentator notes, "The poetic idea here, then, is that by the grace of God, a disciple's trials—including the trials of self-discipline—will ultimately have a seasoning, preservative, refining effect"⁴ on one's life. And in return, the disciples are called to "have salt in themselves"—to live into the unbreakable covenant relationship with God such that they in turn go out and serve as salt in the world. As those who season others with the richness of the Gospel. All for the sake of being "at peace with one another."

There has been a lot happening in the Gospel over the last couple of weeks. One commentary succinctly summarizes this section of Mark's Gospel by noting that "Jesus culminates the teaching session that began in last week's passage. Against the disciples' arguing on the road over who is greatest, and against their assumption of superiority over those 'not following us,' Jesus points toward genuine 'peace with one another' as the goal toward which discipleship's humility, servanthood, hospitality, and self-discipline should lead."⁵

While he is chastising the disciples for their words and actions, Jesus' message is no less applicable to us today. We all fall short at times in our efforts to live the Gospel. Living the Gospel is hard work. There are going to be times when we stumble. There are going to be times when we might be a stumbling block to others. But it is not a reason to beat up ourselves or to throw up our hands in defeat. Just as with the disciples messing up in our Gospel, Jesus is always there, gently guiding us back to the right path. That's why we gather here every week. To better understand the intricacies of the Gospel and what it demands of us. To figure out how to best live the Gospel in our own lives and in our own context. To be nourished through the Body and Blood of our Lord, giving us the strength we need to carry on with this sacred work. And perhaps most importantly, to be together so that we might support one another in our efforts. All of these—worship, learning, sharing the Eucharistic meal, and fellowship—are the salt that season our lives of faith, that preserve our relationship with God, and that binds us in

our covenant with God and one another. “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1827.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 217.

⁴ “Being at Peace: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Eighteenth Week after Pentecost,” SALT, September 20, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/9/25/be-at-peace-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-nineteenth-week-after-pentecost>.

⁵ Ibid.