

Be at Peace with One Another
Rev. Frank Allen
First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

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Mark 9:38-50

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.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward 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. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁷ 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, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ 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.”

NOT ONE OF US?

In last week’s lesson, the disciples argued on the road about who was the greatest.

Jesus told his disciples that if they welcomed a child, a “little one” in his name they would come close to God.

In other words, the greatest in God’s kingdom are those who serve the least among us. Greatness is not measured by comparing ourselves to others.

Greatness is measured by serving others.

So, how do the disciples respond to that instruction?
 Are they careful to welcome little ones into their life?
 I'm afraid the answer is no.

In the very next scene in Mark's gospel the disciples try to stop someone who is casting out demons in Jesus' name. So much for rolling out the welcome mat and embracing the little ones.

Note that they don't try to stop him because his doctrine is wrong. He is after all casting out demons in Jesus' name.
 His ministry is furthering the message that God was in Christ.

No, the reason they tried to stop him was because he was not "one of us."

The verb indicates continuous action.
 They tried over and over again to stop this man from casting out demons in Jesus' name.
 But, he wouldn't quit.

So, the disciples come to Jesus presumably to get His help in stopping this unauthorized exorcist.

I wonder.

Who is allowed to speak for Jesus?
 The history of the church is a history of people straining to decide that question.

Who is "one of us?"

We have argued (and continue to argue) over how to do communion, who is allowed to be a minister, and who controls the church property.

We spend much time enforcing the boundaries of the church. We want to make sure that no unauthorized ministry occurs on our watch.

And yet here we have Jesus telling a disciple,
 "Don't sweat it. If he's doing the right thing in my name, then he's on our side!"

It's interesting to note that Mark tells a story just before this one in which the disciples were unable to cast out a demon because of their lack of faith. (9:18, 28) You have to wonder if that failure played a role in their desire to hinder the work of this unauthorized exorcist.

The Greek word translated "try to stop" is used just one more time in Mark's gospel. In the tenth chapter, people are bringing the children to Jesus to be blessed by him.

And the disciples "try to stop" the parents from bringing their children to Jesus.

And just as he does in our lesson for today, Jesus rebukes his disciples.

Jesus says,
 "Don't try to stop the children from coming to me.
 The kingdom of God belongs to these children."

BIG TENT CHRISTIANITY

We can't help but draw a parallel between these passages and the symbolic message of the Pope in his visit to the United States. Roman Catholics, Protestants, people of other religions and many non-believers alike have been intrigued by this visit.

Why is this true?
 What has he done to change the mood these past few days.

It's deceptively simple.

He welcomes the children.
 He stands up for those who face economic and political oppression.

He gently chides those in power, and encourages them to welcome the foreigner. After all, he says, there was a time when our ancestors were foreigners as well.

By the way, this same logic is used by the Jews. In the Old Testament we read about the fact that they were slaves and foreigners in the land of Egypt.

But, God delivered them, and so it became their duty to treat the foreigners in the midst with deference and respect.

This is yet another example of God's grace requiring a gracious response from God's people.

We may think that the outsiders are not "one of us," but much to our surprise, we find out that they are. Those who drive out demons in the name of Jesus are a part of the family.

Some have said, "If you're not for us, you're against us."
Jesus turned that saying around. He said,
"Whoever is not against us is for us."

Even the smallest act of kindness has significance.
Jesus said that even a cup of water given in his name will be rewarded.

Now Jesus hadn't even met this unauthorized exorcist.
How could he say, "He is with us?"

Jesus could say that because this man was doing good works in the name of Jesus.
Helping people in the name of Jesus is never a bad thing.

Jesus once told a parable about two sons who were asked to do some work in the vineyard by their father. (Matthew 21:28-32)

The first son said, "Yes dad. I'll do what you say. I'll go work in the vineyard."

But, the second son said,
"Sorry old man. This doesn't fit in with my schedule."

So the father left.

Now, the first son, when he realized that his dad was away, decided he had better things to do than work in the vineyard.

But, the second son felt bad about what he had said to his father and went out into the vineyard and worked.

And Jesus asked the religious leaders (toward whom this parable was directed),
"Now who did the will of the father?" The answer was obvious. The one who did what the father wanted.

And Jesus' point was obvious as well. If we have to make a choice between saying the right thing and doing the right thing, doing the right thing wins every time.

In fact the smallest act of kindness done in the name of Jesus has a ripple effect that transforms the world in amazing way. Even a cup of water given in the name of Jesus can have a profound effect on many lives.

Apparently Jesus has a "big tent" view of the Kingdom of God.

Instead of trying to find a way to keep people out Jesus was always trying to find a way to bring people in. Instead of trying to stop people from doing something in his name, Jesus notices and rewards even the smallest act of faith.

HELL FOR THE DISCIPLES

The presence of God is found in children, unauthorized exorcists and those that are not "one of us." And if we cut ourselves off from these little ones, we cut ourselves off from God.

Notice the harsh language that Jesus uses in the next section.
He says,

"If you put a stumbling block before these little ones who believe in me, it would be better if you were to put a millstone around your neck and jump into the sea. Instead of going to hell it would be better to cut off a hand, foot or poke out an eye. Better to be maimed in life than to go to hell in the long run."

What got into Jesus?
Why is he so harsh?
And who is Jesus talking to?

Jesus is talking to his disciples.
Jesus is not talking to those on the outside.
Jesus is talking to those on the inside.

He uses harsh language because he knows that it is human nature to exclude others. He knows that is human nature to reject others because they are not "one of us."

And yet the Kingdom of God is going to be different.

In God's Kingdom people are going to come from the North, the South the East and the West to be a part of the heavenly banquet.

That's the vision.

The disciples are having a hard time catching that vision. So Jesus ramps up the rhetoric to catch their attention. He talks about "hell." Those who don't welcome the little ones are in danger of going to hell.

Actually, the word translated "hell" is the Greek word "Gehenna". Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom. This was a literal place where some kings of Judah engaged in forbidden religious practices, including human sacrifice by fire.

Thankfully King Josiah put an end to this sacrilege, and he destroyed the places where these sacrifices took place. But, from that time forward, this place became a synonym for hell.

This was the place where the little ones were killed. And now this place represents the place of punishment for those who put a stumbling block in the way of the little ones who want to come to Jesus.

We need to remember that Jesus didn't use the threat of hell to destroy and condemn. He used it as a way to save.

Hell is separation from God. And as long as we remain in this self-imposed exile from God's grace, we experience the fire of eternal judgment.

A WAY OUT OF HELL

But, God in Christ comes to give us a way out of hell.

This movement from hell to salvation is illustrated in what happens to the disciples of Jesus.

The disciples do descend into hell when they deny and desert Jesus at the crucifixion.

They are separated from God, and the world goes dark.

Jesus predicted this.

Jesus said that they would all become deserters and they do.
 But, that is not the end of the story.
 The disciples are not left in their self-imposed hell.

The resurrected Jesus comes back to them.
 He meets them where they're at ... in Galilee.
 Their hell does not end with eternal destruction.

It ends with salvation.

When we think of judgment and hell we often do think of eternal destruction.
 We think of that place where the fire always burns.

But, in this case Jesus uses the reference to hell, that place where the little ones were destroyed, as an example of why his disciples need to radically change their ways.

That's what that talk about cutting off the hand and the foot and so forth is all about.

It's a metaphorical call to cut out those things that separate us from God and God's little ones.
 It's a call to rearrange our priorities so that we can welcome others instead of excluding them.

I think the language had to be strong to get the disciples' attention. If we learn anything in Mark's gospel, it is that the disciples were slow learners.

And I think the language has to be strong to get our attention as well. I'm afraid that we are slow learners as well.

SALVATION BEGINS AT A PLACE CALLED HELL

Jesus never ripped off anyone's hand or cut off anyone's foot. Instead, ripping into hands and feet is what we did to Jesus.

The one who loved little ones and put them at the center of his kingdom took upon himself the judgment of those of us who have turned the children away.

Where was Jesus crucified?

At Gehenna, at a place called “hell.”
That’s where he died.

He descended into hell for our sake.

With pierced hands and feet he died on a cross and said,
“Father forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

And when Jesus did that he transformed Gehenna from a place of horrid judgment into a place of salvation for the world.

Oddly enough salvation still begins at a place we call hell.

Salvation begins when we realize that we have thrown away people and blessings that we should have kept. We have relegated to the garbage heap what we should have kept and cherished. We even threw away God’s own Son.

We fall short of God’s glory and what we know to be right.

But, God in Christ has the power to turn it around.
The Spirit of Christ can take us from our self-imposed hells to a place where even the smallest faithful action can bring a world of salvation.

SALTED WITH FIRE

Christians still resist the work of those who are not “one of us.”

And Jesus tells us that when we do that, we are putting a stumbling block in front of those who might otherwise come to faith, and we are cutting ourselves off from the presence of God.

We go to “hell” because we hinder the work of the Kingdom of God. But this is not necessarily our final destination.

God in Christ used the hell of the disciples’ desertion as a way to bring about an even greater salvation after the resurrection.

And I wonder if that is what Jesus is talking about when he tells the disciples that they will be “salted with fire.”

The disciples will come to appreciate the gospel through the process of failure and restoration. They will be purified by fire.

And perhaps the same is true for us.

Maybe none of us can truly appreciate the gospel until we learn through experience what it means to be forgiven. The “salt” of the gospel is purified in our life through the hard lessons of failure and restoration.

Many of you probably know that salt was greatly prized in the ancient world. The only way food could be preserved was through the use of salt.

In fact salt was so precious that people were sometimes paid for their services with salt.

And of course that’s where we get the idea that someone is “worth their salt.” It means that they have earned their pay.

How can we Christians be worth our salt?

Well, we must retain our flavor. And the flavor of salty Christians is a taste of grace.

We remember that at one time, not so long ago, we too were far from the promises of God. At one time, not so long ago, we too were without hope.

But, God in Christ saved us.

He brought us into His family through the power of forgiveness.

By grace we have been saved and so grace must be our message to the world.

We must not let our lives be adulterated by the ways of the world.

We cannot let ourselves be caught up a world that mistrusts and persecutes the foreigner among us.

If we do that, we separate ourselves from the presence of God.

We are like salt that loses its saltiness.

It doesn’t serve a useful purpose any more.

Jesus concludes this passage by telling the disciples,

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

Disciples of Jesus will be at peace with one another because they will be harder on themselves (43-48) than on others (38-41). And the prevailing ethic among the Christian community will be an overwhelming desire to welcome and assist others in the common journey of faith.

To put it another way, we do not want our church to be known as a place of judgment.

We want our church to be known as a place of forgiveness. The church is the place where thirsty people are given a cup of cold water.

That’s what it means to be salty Christians.
We encourage and lift one another up.

We forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us.

AMEN.