

Scripture Readings for Sunday 30th

Num 11:24-29 (NIV)

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again. ²⁶ However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!” ²⁹ But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”

Mark 9:38-50 (NIV)

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” ³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they 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 with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ^{[44]45} And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ^{[46]47} And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.” ⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Sermon: On Causing ‘Little Ones’ to Stumble

You can't help but wonder if some days Jesus felt like butting his head against the wall when it came to his followers' understanding of his mission. Jesus has already *twice* told his 12 disciples that he was going suffer, be killed, and would rise on the third day. And yet, as we saw last week, they were arguing as to who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Jesus explained that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,"¹ and then he enacted that message with a child, concluding that a person who 'welcomes one without honor - or without social status - is the one who has honor in the kingdom of God.'² What happens next, as we see in our reading this morning, reveals that John - at least - *still* doesn't understand.

But to make sense of John's comment, we need to go back to the moment Peter, James, and John came down from the mountain on which the Transfiguration of Jesus had taken place. Jesus found the rest of the disciples in dispute with a man whose son had an evil spirit - although the symptoms sound more like epilepsy to us.³ The desperate father had asked the disciples to exorcise the spirit from his son and they couldn't. Jesus appears to lose his cool with his disciples, saying, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me."⁴ And, of course, Jesus heals the son with no fuss. It is in that context that John tells Jesus that they had seen an unnamed person actively casting out a demon in Christ's name,⁵ and that they had tried to stop him because he was not one of their group.⁶ This all sounds like a petty dispute in a school playground! Ironically, the disciples were trying to stop someone else from performing an exorcism in Christ's name, something that, moments earlier, they couldn't do themselves! And John was expecting Jesus to praise them for doing that!

Now, in John's defense, we need to appreciate that magicians and exorcists in those days would often say an incantation in the name - or authority - of some well-known healer.⁷ So, the person John was trying to stop may *not* have been an explicit follower of Jesus Christ. Does that matter? Well, what does Jesus say? "Do *not* stop him, for no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me."⁸ This parallels Moses' response in our Old Testament reading today, where he says: "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD

¹ Mark 9:35.

² Mark 9:37.

³ Mark 9:14-29.

⁴ Mark 9:19.

⁵ Incidentally, the language of doing things "in Jesus'/Christ's name" was not used during Jesus' lifetime, but later in the Christian community. Jesus' name was invoked in prayer and miracles, and people were baptized in Christ's name. The "name" is not a label, as such, but represents *the person*. It evokes the name as in "*his authority*", or "acting on his behalf."

⁶ Mark 9:38. We might think that John was condemning the person for not following *Jesus*; in fact, it is for not following *us*.

⁷ See Acts 19:11-20.

⁸ Mark 9:39. See this in contrast to the scribes who spoke "badly" of Jesus: Mark 3:22.

would put his Spirit on them!”⁹ Jesus then adds, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”¹⁰ Several things come to mind here.

First, what is the significance of the “name” of Jesus? Some Christians have argued that doing something in Christ’s name is simply acting in manner that is consistent with Christ’s *character*. This means that a person or group – like Amnesty International, Green Peace, or the Red Cross - can be loving, compassionate, or generally doing things that align with Kingdom of God values and so act in Christ’s name. Others suggest that acting in Jesus’ name means “to act *on behalf of* Christ,” and therefore there needs to be an explicit acknowledgement of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Others insist that the very name “Jesus” itself is powerful. Jesus’ response shows that the person who is performing the act in Christ’s name cannot be unaffected by it. In other words, the story may be less about the demon and more about the change in the speaker. Even if the unnamed exorcist is *not* a follower of Jesus the Messiah, that person may come to a better knowledge of him by witnessing a successful outcome to what he or she thinks is a magic spell. Jesus goes on to say that such a person, after miraculously *blessing* another on Jesus’ behalf is unlikely to switch to *cursing* Jesus.¹² Put another way, God has the right to answer the prayers of those don’t claim to follow him; prayer is not the sole prerogative of Christians! And someone who does experience a special moment of grace in such circumstances may, on reflection, *not* see it as a pure coincidence but regard it as a divine answer to their prayer request. If so, it is a sign that the unpredictable wind of God’s Spirit is at work, and it may propel a person towards greater faith in Jesus.

Second, unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus draws the boundaries between those who are “with him” to include as many people as possible. He came to “sinners,” not to the righteous.¹³ Jesus – in this context – is expressing tolerance, whereas John is intolerant. Alternatively, Jesus is portraying an attitude of inclusivity, as opposed to John’s exclusivity. The disciples fell in to a trap that snares many religious groups – they wanted to restrict God’s activity to their group alone. Churches today need to be mindful of that narrow attitude. Moreover, in an age of financial and personnel constraints, churches need to learn cooperation. Too often, churches compete with one other, striving to duplicate their services to the larger community in the same locality. We quickly become possessive; each group wants to keep its own territory when we all claim to be serving the same Master, Jesus Christ. Yes, ecumenical links have taught us to respect other churches, but real cooperation more difficult; I know! So, pray for all the churches here in Amherstburg, and for their ministers, and let us together seek *God’s* vision for *this* community and cooperate with God’s Spirit to make a real difference. When the public see churches meaningfully working together, they will be curious as to how that arises and will certainly want to know more! That will be a surprising witness and it must start with what we have in common,

⁹ Num 11:29.

¹⁰ Mark 9:40.

¹¹ Mark 9:41 is explicitly references those “who belong to the Messiah.”

¹² “Blessing” and “cursing” is an important theme in the Old Testament; see Deut 28.

¹³ Mark 2:17.

and that begins with Holy Communion. Here at St. Andrew's, as many of you know, we have an inclusive table – this is Christ's table, not the Presbyterian Church's, and certainly not mine, and all who are seeking Jesus are welcome.

Jesus, here, is speaking privately to his disciples about what *discipleship* itself means. Mark adds some other sayings of Jesus on the same theme, and he links them back to the little child who is welcomed in Christ's name¹⁴ and connects them to those who are followers of Jesus and in their pastoral care. Jesus is addressing church leaders about their attitudes *and* actions.¹⁵ This is what he tells them: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea."¹⁶ The "little ones" here could mean literally, children, or those young in the faith – likely *both* since neither have power or influence. And the kind of millstone referred to here was one that was turned by a donkey. Obviously, to be tied to heavy rocks and cast into the sea meant certain death. But just in case you are wondering, it is not that Jesus has a dark sense of the macabre, this was, in fact, a means of execution both in Rome and in Palestine. This indicates the *grave* responsibility, literally, for any preacher or minister who causes others to trip up and so damage or lose their faith. We leaders need to be very careful that our own distortions of the way of Christ, or too narrow an understanding of truth and our quickness to pronounce judgment, cause others to stumble who are trying to find the way of faith.

But Jesus doesn't stop there! There are *three* warnings, an indicator that this is important. You will have heard them before, because they strike fear to the heart and can be a source of perpetual guilt. Let's hear them again: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"¹⁷

What does this mean? First, these graphic warnings of Jesus about mutilations are *not* directed to "outsiders" but to "*insiders*." The disciples had better watch out in case their ambition for places of honor prevents them from entering the *fully-completed* kingdom at all! Second, Mark's editing of his material has now switched the discussion from causing "little ones to stumble" - itself worthy of death - to the topic of temptation, sin, and the *final* judgement. In so doing, Mark presents a black-and-white world; on the one hand there is "life," which means entry into the kingdom of God, and on the other

¹⁴ Mark 9:37, and there is also a link to the (little) "cup of water" given in "Christ's name" (Mark 9:41).

¹⁵ With the notion of the "priesthood of all believers," this is not just applicable to church leaders.

¹⁶ Mark 9:42.

¹⁷ Mark 9:43-48. Note: verses 44 and 46 (which are identical with verse 48) are lacking in the best ancient authorities.

hand there is “hell.” As Mark’s see it, there are no fifty shades of grey! Nevertheless, this “all-or-nothing” tone reiterates what Jesus said earlier, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”¹⁸

Third, following rabbinic literature, there is a good case made that all three warnings refer to the sexual transgressions of men, like adultery, with the reference to the eye corresponding to lust.¹⁹ That being so, this is a vivid reminder that discipleship means being *self-disciplined* and, of course, this is best done within the context of a supportive and mutually-accountable community. In light of this stern biblical injunction, the sexual abuse perpetuated by priests is even more abhorrent, especially when it involves children. In case Protestants smirk and point the finger at Catholics, the founder of the Willow Creek megachurch, Bill Hybels, recently had to resign because of sexual malpractice. And Canadian Presbyterian ministers have been involved in similar abuse cases too, as some of you will know. What Jesus is saying is that complacency is not a valid response; instead, *cut out that cancer*. Such actions by ministers in churches can, quite understandably, cause “little children” to stumble and lose their faith in God - and in the church, in men, and in justice. All are thoroughly reprehensible. Disciples, says Jesus, are to be people of integrity and authenticity.

Now, just in case you are sitting comfortably and are somewhat relieved you are not a minister, recall Martin Luther’s call for the “priesthood of all believers.” Many people misunderstand this to simply mean priests and ministers are unnecessary *as intermediaries* because everyone now has direct access to God through Jesus, who is our great High Priest, (as it says in Hebrews).²⁰ That much is true and is an important principle of the Reformation. But that is to seriously misunderstand Luther’s point. He wanted *everyone* to behave morally and ethically like good priests and therefore *not* to set ministers on pedestals as somehow being set-apart or “holy” people. That’s one reason why he translated the Bible into German and instigated educational catechisms to teach and train the populace! So *you* are not let of the hook here; you too are to be people of integrity!

Fourth, Mark, for the first time introduces a severe triple-warning that such people are heading for the rubbish heap, “*Gehenna*,” which is translated as “hell” in our Bibles. Gehenna is a valley running south and southwest of Jerusalem and had, in the past, been a site of idolatrous worship – including child sacrifice.²¹ As part of the Jewish reform of King Josiah, Gehenna became the rubbish heap the Jerusalem, pervaded by maggots and the stench of decay, where fire smoldered day and night. In Jewish apocalyptic literature it came to signify the destination of the dead bodies of those who rebelled against God. It is from this imagery that the notion of hell’s fire arises. I am going to say plainly that taking hell as a *literal* place of fire and eternal torture is terribly misguided and unhelpful. It creates unnecessary

¹⁸ Mark 9:40.

¹⁹ Rabbi’s called masturbation “adultery with the hand” and adultery in the usual way as “adultery with the foot.” (In biblical Hebrew the ‘foot’ is sometimes a euphemism for male genitals, see Isa 6:2, 7:20.) Even so, the list of body parts (hand, foot, and eye) reflects the most common injuries to a rural population consisting of agricultural laborers and craftsmen. Don’t overlook the fact the story of Oedipus, who gouged out his own eyes, was well-known!

²⁰ Heb 4:14-5:10.

²¹ See Josh 15:8, 18:16; 2 Kings 16:3, 21:6, 23:10–14; 2 Chron 28:3, 33:6; Jer 7:31, 19:4–5, 32:35; Isa 66:24; and Sirach 7:17.

fear and anxiety. Instead, see hell as deliberate separation from God, one that can begin now and could carry on forever. As Daniel Migliore puts it, “hell is simply wanting to be oneself apart from God’s grace and in isolation from others. Hell is self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God.” Put simply, we choose “hell”; God does not send us there.²² But Gehenna is not the focus of this passage, this stark prophetic warning is *so that we will choose to do the very opposite* and pay attention to the little ones and not impede their path to faith. And so, in the end, we are left with the question: do we care about *holiness* – living honorable lives as befits the name “Christian”?

Fifth and finally, Jesus is not advocating *literal* self-mutilation; everyone in his day appreciated this was a metaphor – just as they did with reference to Jerusalem’s smoldering rubbish heap. Instead, discipleship involves *discipline* and that has to be *deliberate*; and it can be painful too. We are then, to resist temptation. Taking this “cutting off” of a hand or a foot *figuratively* means that because we are vulnerable to a particular temptation we need to treat it *as dead to us* – as surgically removed. If you are tempted to spend and rack-up debt, cut your credit cards in half! If porn is the problem, begin by cutting off your internet access! If you are prone to gossiping or lying, cut out your tongue – put a zip on your lips and so pause and think before you speak!²³ If you are prone to gambling or drinking, don’t place yourself in a position where you can fall! Since many temptations occur when we are alone, be aware of that vulnerability, and go to a public space – Tim Hortons – and avoid secrecy. This doesn’t solve everything, of course, but incrementally – with the strengthening help of the Holy Spirit²⁴ – habits can change; we can become *free* from *bondage* to sin. Yes, we remain vulnerable to a specific temptation’s charm, but not enslaved to it. Breaking habits is hard, especially at first, and it requires intentionality of attitudes *and* actions. It means taking sin *deadly* seriously – that is what these warnings are all about.²⁵ After all, Holy Communion is a reminder how deadly seriously Jesus took sin himself.

Let us pray.

²² See also the final chapter in *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.* (by Tim Reddish).

²³ See James 3.

²⁴ “Comforter” is not the best word to describe the Holy Spirit, it is better to think of the Spirit in terms of “Strengthener” or the One who gives courage.

²⁵ Scholars broadly admit that Mark 9:49-50 is obscure in this context. Perhaps the best way to see these verses is that salt can purify and/or protect from corruption. Salt cannot, by definition, lose its saltiness, but it was rarely found in a pure state; the impurities mixed with it made it worthless. Despite Num 18:19, the connection between salt and fire is unclear here, and so perhaps it is wise not to guess.