

Sermon for Sept. 27th 2009 Mark 9

Two blocks of very distinct materials form our gospel lesson for today. First there is a discussion provoked by the disciple's reaction to an exorcist who casts out demons in the name of Jesus. The disciples move to quash the ministry of this man who was casting out demons because, as they put it, "he was not following us".

The disciples were disinclined to allowing others outside their own group to exercise such power, even if it was in the good cause of casting out demons. But Jesus says to them, "do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me."

These first verses of the gospel lesson remind us that many times we put up barriers in our own faith communities. Jesus' answer to John's question instructs us to take those barriers down. "Whoever is not against us is for us" says Jesus.

These verses remind us of the need to break down the barriers of bigotry and build up the avenues of acceptance. They tell us of the need for us to be accepting of all of the various branches of the Christian family tree.

The second part of the gospel lesson for today is in some ways similar to the first but goes into much more detail about what can happen when we allow our human sins to get in the way of furthering the kingdom of God. This portion of the Gospel lesson is about what happens when we put up stumbling blocks. A stumbling block is literally something one falls on, a trap or hindrance placed in another person's way.

And the stumbling blocks Jesus is warning against in the gospel lesson this morning are the stumbling blocks put in the way of furthering the kingdom of Christ.

But the way Jesus says it in these few verses is difficult to hear and to understand – all this speak of drowning and cutting off body parts and hell.. At this point it might be helpful to dissect these verses a bit.

The first verse –the one about putting a stumbling block before little ones and being thrown into the sea with a millstone around the neck - deals with being a stumbling block to others. The little ones Jesus is referring to here are not necessarily infants, rather they are new believers.

In this verse Jesus is warning his disciples about the offense of causing one of the new believers to lose trust in Jesus. The offense is very serious so serious in fact that he tells his disciples they would be better off drowned than they would if they were purposefully leading new believers away from the truth.

The second set of verses – the ones that begin by telling us it is better to cut off our hand if it causes us to sin - deal with being stumbling blocks to ourselves.

First – let’s tackle this major stumbling block called hell. Jesus uses the word three times in these verses. I think it might be helpful if you know the origin of this word. The word translated hell is Gehenna. Gehenna is an Aramaic word that refers to a place Southwest of Jerusalem where Moloch worship was once practiced.

This worship involved sacrificing children. After this worship became outlawed the place Gehanna became the local garbage dump where trash was constantly burned. In late Judaism, Gehenna became a term used to describe the place of divine punishment. The name was associated with permanent destruction and decay and represented all that was the reverse of life and joy.

Another difficult portion of this gospel lesson deals with the dismembering of body parts so let’s now tackle that stumbling block.

The hand the foot and the eye are highly indispensable parts of the body and in this case they may be metaphors for those faults and shortcomings that are very close to us, so close that they are depicted as body parts. These shortcomings, which are causing us to sin and in turn causing us to be separated from God, must be entirely eliminated, disposed of, cut off. We must eliminate anything that is impeding our relationship with Christ.

What are the stumbling blocks that are tripping you up in your relationship with God? Is it the block of busyness so that there is no time left in the day for God? Is it the block of gossip or fear or greed? Is it the stumbling block of exclusivity, like the disciples? Whatever the stumbling block may be- Jesus is asking each of us to remove that block. And he asks us this for our own good – because truly if you think about it – when we keep that stumbling block in the way of either ourselves or others – it begins to feel like we are living amongst burning smelly garbage. If we heed Jesus’ words in this gospel lesson we will be closer to God and therefore living in peace even amidst a world that is not always peaceful.

All we need to do is ask God to help us and then place our stumbling blocks at the foot of the cross. Jesus will restore to us the good saltiness so that we may in turn be at peace with God and with each other.

Let us pray

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts, break down the barriers that separate us, take away the stumbling blocks of injustice, and the roadblocks of selfishness, and unite us in bonds of love, that all people may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, the one who gave his life for love, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.