

Mark 9:38 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.

Mark 9:42 “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.

FIRE!

Several years ago the Catholic Digest printed the following parable:

Once there was an ecumenical crusade that was being held in a large city. Every imaginable denomination was in attendance for this unprecedented spiritual event.

During one very well attended meeting a secretary suddenly rushed in shouting, “The building is on fire! The building is on fire!” In response the Methodists gathered in a corner and prayed. The Baptists cried, “Where is the water?” The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings.

The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring that fire was evil. The Roman Catholics passed a plate to cover the damages. The Jews posted symbols on the doors hoping the fire would pass over them.

The Congregationalists shouted, “Every man for himself.” The Fundamentalists proclaimed, “It’s the vengeance of God.

The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out. The Christian Scientists concluded that there was no fire.

And what about the Presbyterians? The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson to form a committee to look into the matter and make a written report.

Finally, it was left to the secretary to grab a fire extinguisher and actually put the fire out.

The point of this little parable is well taken. People of faith can be very inefficient when it comes to tackling a problem. Our world might be on fire, but we are fatally obsessed with the fine points of right doctrine and proper procedure.

THE UNAUTHORIZED EXORCIST

In our passage for today Jesus seems less interested in theology and procedure and more interested in results. There's a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus, but he's not "officially" a disciple. As the disciples put it, "He's not one of us."

The disciples are sure that Jesus doesn't want any unauthorized exorcists running around driving out demons in his name. You can understand why.

These past few weeks we've been talking about the fact that in Mark's gospel Jesus was always commanding his disciples and those that he healed to not tell anyone about

it. Jesus didn't want anyone misrepresenting his message and mission. After all Jesus' own disciples didn't have a clue about the coming kingdom.

So John and the other disciples told this unauthorized exorcist to stop. If they, the inner circle of disciples couldn't openly heal in Jesus' name, what right did this man have to heal in the name of Jesus?

But, once again we find that the grace of God as revealed in Jesus is always surprising.

Instead of saying what they expected him to say, something like, "Good job. You've keeping this quiet just like I wanted you to do," Jesus says, "Don't stop him. Whoever does a deed of power in my name won't be able to say bad things about us later on. Whoever is not against us is for us."

WHO IS FOR US?

Whoever is not against us is for us.

That seems to be setting the bar pretty low when it comes to doctrinal purity.

And that makes this a hard passage for us Presbyterians to hear. We pride ourselves on developing a sound theology.

We believe that if someone is going to preach the gospel they need more than good intentions and a warm heart.

If a person preaches in this church they need to study theology and Bible and Christian Education and much, much more. They need to pass exams and be thoroughly evaluated before we can say that they are one of us. Not just anyone can speak in the name of Jesus.

We believe that a lot of folks use the name of Jesus and yet seem to have no clue about who he really is. And so we must have standards. Outsiders have to become insiders if they are to use the name of Jesus. They have to become one of us.

And being Presbyterians we even have a committee to make sure that this happens.

But, Jesus decided that this particular candidate for the ministry would be allowed to enter under the exceptional clause. There would be no examination by Presbytery or questioning by a committee of the disciples.

All he needed was Jesus' seal of approval.

And he had that. Jesus said,
"He is with us."

THE POWER OF GOOD WORKS

Now Jesus hadn't even met this man. 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 said, "Even a cup of water given in my name can bring redemption."

Jesus once told a parable about two sons who asked to do something 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 to play with his Nintendo instead of working. (Well, he would have been playing his Nintendo if they had them in those days.) 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.

A MENNONITE STORY

Myron Augsburg a prominent biblical scholar in the Mennonite Church told a story that illustrates this principle very well.

There was an earthquake in Los Angeles and a Christian College that he sponsored was severely damaged. Myron flew out to look at it, and then arranged for its reconstruction.

He wanted to find a contractor, a builder, that I could trust, and coming from the Mennonite church he wanted to find a Mennonite builder. He and learned about a Mr. Herman Riemple and through him he was able to get his son, Dennis, to renovate this building. Myron wrote,

“I went back to Washington, D.C. and his son came back from a trip to Africa, and so I called him on the telephone

and believe it or not in this modern age, we worked out a contract by telephone, agreed on it, and he went to work on the house. But with that there's an amazing story I learned and perhaps it is a reason why these persons could be so well trusted.

Herman Riemple's father was Aaron Riemple. He lived in Gnadenfeldt, Russia. He had a large estate, was a very wealthy Mennonite farmer. He was so well known that the Czar of Russia would come and go hunting on his estate. In the early teens of this century, when the Red and White Armies were battling, they raged back and forth across Gnadenfeldt.

One evening Herman Riemple was coming home from the market where he had gotten some things for his wife, and he came by a railroad siding and here was a box car full of people to be shipped off to Siberia, and a man called out and said, 'Sir, we're so hungry. We've been in here all day with nothing to eat. Can you help us?'

And Herman Riemple, out of the goodness of his own spirit and heart, went over and shoved his bolognas and his bread and cheese through the slats and the man said, 'Thank you.'

And Herman Riemple said, 'God bless you.' And he went on home.

Sometime later the Red Army overran the whole territory. They took a lot of these Mennonite farmers and put them in box cars and shipped them off to Siberia.

Now Herman Riemple had lost his estate. He went from wealth to poverty, but he still had his own ingenuity and he was quite an entrepreneur, and in Siberia he began getting tea imported from China, and he was selling tea.

But this was contrary to the pattern of the new regime, and he was accused of a kind of capitalism in the midst of the new Marxist pattern of life, and he was brought to trial.

In the trial, of course, the witness was given against him and he was guilty of this capitalism. The Commissar asked him to step forward to be sentenced, and Aaron Riemple stepped forward, expecting this to mean his death. The Commissar looked at him and said, "I believe we have met before."

Mr. Riemple said, "Your Honor, I think not."

"Yes," he said, "I think we have. Have you been in Gnadenfeldt?"

"Yes," he said, "I lived in Gnadenfeldt."

The Commissar asked him, "Do you remember one evening when a man called you from a box car and said,

"Sir, we've been in here all day with nothing to eat. Would you help us?"

"Ah, yes," he said, "I remember."

"And what did you do?"

"Why I went over and shoved my bolognas and bread and cheese through the slats."

"And what did you say?"

I said, "God bless you."

The Commissar said, "We have met before. I was that man." He said, "I'm not going to sentence you. If you would like, I will sign papers and you and your family can emigrate."

And Riemple said, "Sir, if you will sign those papers for all Riemples, I've got brothers here with their families."

And this whole family immigrated to California.

Jesus said that even a cup of water given in his name can bring a reward. There is power in Christian service. It is not the power of domination and control but the power of love.

Aaron Riemple when he shoved that cheese, bread and bologna through the slats didn't know what would happen in the future. But, he did it because he was a practicing Christian. And he was rewarded for his action. It

changed not only his future but the future of his whole family.

Evil can be overcome by good. There is a hidden power unleashed when people serve in the name of Christ.

HE GAVE ME WATER

A man who was in southern India some years ago heard a story from one of the pastors there about an old man who was a Hindu. The old man had lived all of his life in a small village with a polluted well. The people of the village were almost always sick, and no one enjoyed robust health.

In time the Christian missionaries came to that village, and as is proper for a missionary, their concern was both personal and social. In addition to the words they spoke about Christ, they dug a well, a good well, for the people there.

Shortly after the missionaries left, government officials came into the village and asked about the influence of the missionaries on the people. In particular they asked the old man who lived alone in a shanty if the missionaries had tried to convert him to Christ. (As some of you know in many countries conversion to another faith is frowned upon or even illegal.)

Anyway, the old man responded that the missionaries didn't pressure him to convert. The officials were satisfied with his answer and were about to leave when they glanced up on the wall and saw a newspaper picture of Jesus.

Upon seeing the picture they repeated their question to the old man, "What do you mean they didn't try to convert you? Why was the picture of Jesus on your wall?"

The old man explained that he had gone down into the village to buy some fish a few days earlier, and the merchant who sold him the fish had wrapped them in an old newspaper that contained the picture of Jesus. When the old man saw the picture, he had put it on the wall.

The officials raised the question again, "Why was the picture there if he wasn't a Christian? Why did he insist on keeping it there?"

The old man explained, "I had to put it there; it was because of that man that I was given clean water to drink."

So the Bible tells us that the smallest act of compassion is important in God's kingdom. One glass of clean water or a loaf of bread and bologna are more important than we

might think. And we are advised not to hinder those who are in the business of compassion.

HELL FOR THOSE WHO HINDER

Indeed, this passage seems to suggest that if we hinder the work of these little ones we are the ones who are in danger of judgment.

Remember this is a consistent theme throughout the gospel of Mark. We've been talking about it these past few weeks. The insiders, the religious leaders and the disciples just don't get it. They do not respond in faith to the kingdom of God as revealed in the actions of Jesus.

On the other hand the outsiders do get it. It is the foreigner, the sinner and the powerless who understand the power of God as revealed in Jesus. They are the little ones who know the meaning of true faith.

And in a most surprising turn of events it is not the outsiders who are judged by the coming of Christ. It is the insiders who are judged. They are judged because their actions hinder the work of God's kingdom as revealed in Jesus.

This passage like so many passages in Mark's gospel should be very frightening to us. Why? It is because we

are the insiders. We are the ones who know about the kingdom of God, and therefore we will be judged first when we hinder the work of God's kingdom.

Many people like to say, "Charity begins at home." And when they say that they mean, "Let's help our own family and our own nation before we help anyone else."

But, as it so often happens Jesus turns conventional wisdom on its head. Jesus says that our neighbor is anyone, anywhere who is in need, and it is not charity but judgment that begins at home!

When disciples and religious leaders hinder the work of the kingdom they are in danger of hell. Jesus said, "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."

And then Jesus goes on to say that it would be better for us to cut off a hand or a foot or gouge out an eye than to hinder the work of the kingdom. It would be better for us to be maimed in this life than to go to hell in the next life.

That sounds a bit harsh doesn't it? What was Jesus trying to say to his disciples?

A TRIP TO GEHENNA

First, let's talk about the word he uses that is translated hell. The Greek word is "Gehenna", and it was a place that everyone in the ancient world could visit.

It was the local garbage dump.

The valley of Hinnon was located on Jerusalem's east side, and it was the place where in ancient days sacrifices were made to the god Baal and children were actually sacrificed to the god Moloch.

Later God's people saw the error of their ways and decided that the place where these terrible things happened should be cursed. So, they made it into the local garbage dump. There was always a fire smoldering at the local garbage dump. And that terrible place was now filled not only with garbage but also with the rotting carcasses of dead animals and even the bodies of the most despicable criminals.

That's hell. It's the place where discarded things and discarded people are thrown away. It's not a place that you want to visit. It is a powerful symbol of judgment. And judgment begins at home.

I stand about five feet above you on Sunday mornings, and did you know that it's hotter up here? Judgment begins with someone like me who dares to claim the title of Christian leader.

I wonder how many times I have been a stumbling block to those who might have followed Jesus. I wonder how many people I have rejected that should have been encouraged and accepted. I wonder how many people I have relegated to hell, the garbage dump of life in the name of true faith.

The problem is that I don't know, and you don't know either. And Jesus tells us that when we throw away the little ones on the garbage dump of life we throw away our own lives. We go to hell.

As the Apostle Paul once put it, "I'm always making mistakes. I'm always doing what I know is wrong, and I'm always NOT doing what I know is right.

Who can save me from myself?" (See Romans 7:21-24)

SALVATION BEGINS IN HELL!

Paul's answer is that we cannot save ourselves, but we can be saved by the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

Jesus saves us from ourselves. Jesus takes the punishment that should have been ours.

Jesus never ripped off anyone's hand or cut off anyone's foot, even though many of us no doubt deserve it. 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 the garbage dump of Jerusalem 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 action of faith can bring a world of salvation.

God help us see the salvation that begins in hell.

Amen.