

**September 29, 2024**

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)**

<sup>38</sup>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." <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>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.

<sup>42</sup>"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. <sup>43</sup>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. <sup>45</sup>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. <sup>47</sup>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, <sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

<sup>49</sup>"For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup>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."

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word

## **Message**

The Rev. Dr. David Galloway, a retired Episcopal Bishop tells this story about a moment he had in the clubhouse following a round of golf in Tyler, Texas. He shares: The room was full of people telling lies about their great round of golf, of spectacular shots made and of long putts sunk. Into that room entered a man I shall call Hugh. Hugh was a larger-than-life character straight out of central casting—the quintessential Texas oil man, stocky, ruddy complexion, who was intent on expressing every thought and feeling where everyone could hear it. Hugh always wanted you to know that he was in the house. He was a backslapping, heehawing fellow both on the golf course and around town. Funny thing was that nobody wanted to play with him because he was so obnoxious. I'll never forgive my friend Dan, who is a much better Christian than I am. He felt sorry for Hugh one day and invited him to join our group. For eighteen holes, I had to put up with his loud-mouthed antics. It was the most horrible round of golf in my life.

But on this day, Hugh walked into the room, a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other. He came up to my table and started talking loudly, so loud that the attention of the room naturally turned toward him. He bellowed at me, "You Episcopalians don't believe in the Bible, do you?!"

Rather than take the bait, I just looked at him and smiled weakly, hoping he would pass on by like an East Texas thunderstorm.

He was referring to a recent decision by the church on some topic that was not to his liking. He went on, "David, I want to go to a church that is Bible-believing. Do you understand me? A place where the preacher is not trying to tippy toe around the hard lessons of Jesus, a preacher who will lay it on the line, not try to water down the Gospel. I want a preacher who will be bold and put it out there, the full measure of the Bible, not hold back a lick. I want a preacher who will not let sinners slide and will call them out by name. I want the full Gospel. I don't want a preacher to pussy-foot around the message of Jesus."

I do not know where my response came from, but I heard it coming from my lips even as I was collecting my thoughts. "You want the full Gospel, Hugh? You mean the part about selling all you have and giving it to the poor?"

A pregnant silence fell over the room, after which Hugh responded, "Well, not that part!"

The room broke up in laughter. Hugh slunk out of the room as quietly as possible. Everyone was high fiving me for having put Hugh in his place. "Way to go's" from Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews. David had slain Goliath once again, and all was right with the world.

I went home that night particularly proud of myself and proceeded to tell the story to my wife. Mary, who is also a better Christian than I am, laughed at the story, but then, quickly changing her facial expression from one of mirth to severity, asked me a question that put me in my place: "David," she asked curtly, "what part of the Gospel do you avoid?"

Millstones. Stumbling blocks. Maimed bodies. Fire. This week's Gospel reading offers us some of the harshest and most graphic language in the New Testament. Worse, the disturbing language comes straight from Jesus's own mouth. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off," he says. If you cause a "little one" who trusts in God to stumble, you're better off having a heavy stone wrapped around your neck and drowning in the ocean, he says. If you aren't willing to cut off your offending eyes, hands, or feet, you'll be thrown into hell, a place where "the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched," he says.

I don't know about you, but this isn't my favorite passage in Scripture. In fact, it's one of those uncomfortable parts of the Bible that I tend to gloss over in my devotional reading. It is a part of the Gospel that I avoid like the plague. It's not that I don't want to take sin seriously. I absolutely do. But *hell*? Self-mutilation? Death-by-drowning? Whatever happened to "What a Friend We Have in Jesus?" Jesus, gentle, meek, and mild? What happened to unfailing forgiveness and mercy?

Context can really help us here. By this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is speaking openly and frequently about his impending death. And it's not just talk — he's making his way south towards Jerusalem, away from safety of the Galilean hinterlands towards the cross. In other words, he knows he's running out of time. He's grimly aware that he has mere days left to prepare his still clueless disciples for what's coming.

So, he ramps things up. We can feel Jesus's growing sense of urgency in its exaggerated and violent language, and his frustration with how easily his disciples get distracted. His impatience at how often they get bogged down in minutiae. "PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT'S IMPORTANT," he seems to be shouting through the grisly images of hacked off limbs and unquenchable fire. "Faith is hard! There's so much at stake! What you say and do, what you focus on, what you prioritize — *these things matter!* Your choices have life-and-death consequences. So *please* don't be stumbling blocks. Please don't make faith harder for yourselves or for others than it already is!"

What sets Jesus off in this instance is his disciples' complaint that someone else — an outsider — is casting out demons in Jesus's name. "We tried to stop him," they tell Jesus proudly, as if their grown-up version of schoolyard tattling will earn them brownie points. "Because he was not following us." Notice that they say "*us*." Not, "We tried to stop him because he's not following *you*, Lord" but "we tried to stop him because his practice, his path, his way of doing faith, doesn't look like *ours*."

Jesus's response? Leave him alone. Quit pestering him. Get a clue. "Whoever is not against us is for us."

The longer I'm a Christian, the more awed and overwhelmed I am by the radical nature of Jesus's openness, inclusivity, and hospitality. *Every* time I think I've made my circle of inclusion wide enough, Jesus says, "Nope. Make it wider. Your circle is still too small and stingy." *Every* time I think I've drawn an appropriate line in the sand — between us and them, saint and sinner, saved and damned — Jesus scatters sand all over my line until it disappears. "*Whoever is not against us is for us.*" Whoever doesn't oppose the beautiful and salvific works of God — mercy, love, kindness, justice, liberation, peacemaking, healing, nurturing — is on Christ's side. How mind-blowing is that? How challenging for us Christians who love our institutional, denominational, doctrinal, and socio-cultural cliques so very, very much?

What would it look like for each of us to help the *other person* succeed? Instead of calling out each other's faults; instead of focusing only on our own comfort and rightness; instead of making an already hard road even harder for someone else to travel; what if we each committed to helping the other succeed? What if we cleared paths for each other? Removed obstacles for each other? Helped each other towards success?"

Jesus pleads with his disciples—look at the stumbling blocks you place in front of yourselves and each other. Look at the perverse pleasure you take in excluding people who live, believe, worship, serve, and practice differently than you do. Look at how smug and superior you feel when your brothers and sisters fail. Look at how insecure and tenuous your own faith must be, if its survival depends on your dismantling of someone else's.

Okay, you might be thinking. I get that. But why such harsh language? Why “worms” and “fire” and missing limbs? Well, because the stakes are so high. Because what we do really matters. If Jesus is telling us the truth in this passage, then it is entirely possible for Jesus's beloved “little ones” to stumble because of our carelessness, our apathy, our unkindness, our dogmatism, our prejudices, our unforgiveness, our laziness, and our fear. It is even possible for them to stumble as a result of our well-intentioned efforts to protect God, protect the Church, and protect the “purity” of our religion. In chastening the outsider exorcist, the disciples were trying to keep their borders safe and secure. They didn't want Jesus' ministry to be tainted by folks who didn't have insider knowledge, precise technique, and correct dogma. “Knock it off,” was Jesus's curt response. “I don't need or want that kind of protection. Look at the little ones. *They're* the ones who are vulnerable and need protection. Look what you're doing to them!”

In case we're tempted to ignore him. Jesus ominously says four times in this passage: “*It would be better for you...*” Better for us if we what? If we mutilate our bodies to prove our devotion? Drown ourselves in the nearest body of water to keep other believers from losing their faith? No. Jesus doesn't mean any of this literally. Jesus, does, however, want us to think carefully about what it costs to become path clearers. Stumbling block removers. People of God who actually help each other succeed. Because let's be honest: sometimes, the process of removing a stumbling block from the path of faith *can* feel like surgery without anesthesia. Saying goodbye to a harmful relationship, surrendering a cherished point of view, breaking an addiction, forgiving a family member, making a significant lifestyle change, welcoming the oddball Other — each of these things can feel like deaths. Like drownings. Like losing our arms and legs. Jesus knows what he's talking about; it *hurts* to change. It hurts to cut off the precious, familiar things we cling to for dear life — even as those things slowly kill us. Lingering prejudices. The bottle. The affair. The obsession with money. The decades-old shame. The resentment, the victimhood, the self-hatred, the rigidity.

We do ourselves a great disservice if we read Jesus's stark words in this passage and hear condemnation. Jesus isn't condemning us; he's reminding us of truths we already intuitively know. The way of the cross is *hard*. It's costly. It can hurt. And that there *is* a place called hell that we create for ourselves and for others when we cling to our sins and stumbling blocks, instead of allowing Jesus, in his deep mercy, to remove them.

The will of God is not that we make the path of faith even rockier than it needs to be. God is *not* invested in our self-loathing. As Franciscan Father Richard Rohr puts it: “It is quite helpful to see sin like an addiction—as a destructive disease, instead of something for which we’re culpable or punishable and that ‘makes God unhappy.’ If sin indeed makes God ‘unhappy,’ it is because God loves us, desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of the disease.”

What would it be like to cut away the disease, for our own sakes, and for the sakes of our fellow travelers? What would it be like if the children of God helped each other to succeed? Imagine the charismatic Christian removing stumbling blocks for the liturgical one. The liberal clearing paths for the conservative and vice versa. The insider befriending the outsider. What would happen if we expanded the circle, lengthened the table, and decided to feast together? We’d become The Company of the Blessedly Wounded, yes, with our missing limbs and our patched-over eyes. We wouldn’t look as shiny and unassailable as we did before. But we would be path clearers. We’d be stumbling block removers. We’d be healers and exorcists. Best of all, no little one would ever lose their way again because of us.

### **Commission & Blessing**

Go now, remembering that even sharing a cup of cold water brings honor to God.

When suffering comes, pray in faith.

In times of joy, sing songs of praise.

Persevere in prayer and action so that others will come to see Christ living in you.

And may God save you from all that would harm you;

May Christ Jesus heal you and raise you up;

and may the Holy Spirit anoint you with hope and give you peace with one another.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**