

sermon-9/27/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Radical Spiritual Surgery”
Mark 9:38-50

Will Willimon, Methodist Bishop and former University professor, writes, “Awhile back I was asked, in a discussion in a church youth group, ‘What about Muslims? Will they be saved? What about people like them who don’t believe in Jesus?’” And I responded, ‘I’m not sure. Jesus says not one word about Muslims. No, when Jesus is in a tough-minded, take-no-prisoners frame of mind, he beats up on his own disciples!’”

Willimon likes to speak tongue in cheek, but he has a point. Jesus is much harder on those in the “in group” than he is on those outside. A classic example of that is our passage for today in Mark.

In that passage we hear John criticizing someone outside the inner group of Jesus’ disciples. Apparently that outsider was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. John may have even been jealous. Earlier in Mark’s gospel he, and the other disciples, had failed when they tried to cast out a demon.

At the least, John felt threatened by this outsider and wanted Jesus to stop him. Jesus, surprisingly, disagrees. Instead we hear one of the most inclusive sayings in the whole Bible. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus, as one commentator notes, is making it clear his kingdom is about openness, trust and building bridges. It is not about protecting the exclusive little club in which the disciples thought they were members.

This passage in Mark moves from stop criticizing those on the outside, to some very strong statements about self-criticism for those on the inside. The language in the rest of this passage can sound very judgmental. When you throw in talk about hell fire and the worm that never dies, it can be perplexing, if not troublesome.

I will own up to the fact that I’m basically one who pushes God’s grace a whole lot more than God’s judgment. I have had enough of judgmental religion with all its do’s and don’ts. That brand of Christianity that emphasizes guilt, shame, and manipulation is offensive to me and not very helpful at this time in my life.

But, from time to time, those who think like me can benefit from a counter message. Passages from the Bible like this can push us to more self-reflection. This can lead us to do some tough prioritizing. Soon it will be apparent that to decide on one priority means we need to give up something, maybe even something we would very much like to keep.

Before we get to that discussion, we need to deal with the use of hyperbole, or exaggeration to make a point, and the issues surrounding the concept of hell. All this talk about cutting off hands or feet, plucking out an eye is certainly not to be taken literally. Jesus is not promoting self-mutilation. That, hopefully, is obvious to most, but it has not been so obvious down through the ages. There have been Christians who have harmed themselves in their attempt to be serious Christians. We don’t want to go there today.

The language about hell is also a sticky issue. The word translated “hell” is “Gehenna.” This was the valley outside Jerusalem where some pretty abominable practices had taken place. People used to perform child sacrifices there. Thus, by the time of Jesus, the people decided Gehenna was a good place for the garbage dump.

It was a horrible place. It stank of dead animal carcasses. Executed criminals’ bodies used to be tossed there instead of being given a proper burial. It was often on fire as they tried to burn up all that garbage so disease would not spread. To be thrown into Gehenna would be a terrible plight. Jesus was basically saying don’t live in such a way that your life is fit only for the garbage dump. If you live a trashy life, then you will end up in the garbage.

Any notion of a place of eternal damnation where people suffer in a burning pit called hell, a place where God tortures people for their sins, simply does not fit with the God I have come to know in Jesus. It is a dangerous notion. If God can torture people for their wrongdoing out of some notion of holy justice, then it is not a far jump to condoning torture for whatever good reason we might decide makes that practice reasonable.

This is a complicated subject. I, in no way, want to ignore God’s justice, and our need to be accountable for our shabby behavior. I just want to put aside any notion of a place of eternal punishment and torture, so we can hear this passage as it challenges us today whether we believe in hell or not.

Certainly the language Jesus uses is strong. The hyperbole of causing someone to be drowned for putting a stumbling block in the way of little ones, meaning new, or vulnerable Christians, and cutting off body parts if they cause us to sin, all of that language is trying to get us to take seriously Jesus’ call to his disciples to be a little more self-critical.

He is making it clear when we put a stumbling block before others causing them to give up their faith, or when our own actions cause us to stumble, getting in the way of our discipleship, then we need to change.

The word translated “stumble” is more literally “scandalize.” This is not just some minor misstep, something we do by mistake, or some little character flaw that is irritating. Jesus is talking about big issues that must be taken seriously.

What in your life gets in the way of you being a faithful disciple? Is it fear that makes you always play it safe, never taking any chances or risks for the gospel? Cut it off. Is it seeing others as objects that you can use to meet your own needs? Pluck it out. Is it self-centeredness or a pious, sanctimonious or judgmental form of Christianity that turns others off to giving Christianity a chance? Knock it off.

Jesus ends this passage with the very helpful metaphor of salt. Christians are to be salt to the world. We are to bring out life's flavor for those around us. We are to preserve what is best so that we might nourish the world.

In my last church in Pennsylvania, on the first anniversary of 9/11, most of the churches held a worship service. We had quite a few Muslims living in that little university town. They were frightened. Shop keepers had refused service to them for a time after 9/11. The first anniversary brought back many of those feelings of being hated or seen as suspicious and dangerous.

As I said, many of the other churches held services where they invited local fire fighters and police officers to celebrate their service to the community. Those services were really patriotic celebrations in a religious guise. I certainly do not have anything against patriotism or respecting our public servants. But, isn't the Church called to do more than that?

The church where I was pastor decided to do an interfaith potluck and prayer service on that first anniversary. We had a wonderful meal with Hindus, Muslims, Bhuddists, Christians and Jews all gathered around tables sharing their community's favorite dishes. Then we gathered in the fellowship hall to light candles and say prayers from our various religious traditions. It was powerful. Some were in tears. I was told by some of the Muslims that our church was one place where they felt safe.

That is being salt to the community. That is risking ridicule from the larger community. We certainly heard negative comments from other churches for praying with non-Christians.

All of this is to say, when we decide to cut off all that leads to stumbling blocks for ourselves or vulnerable others in the Christian community, when we attempt to be salt to the world, this will require sacrifice. It may even require radical spiritual surgery, as one commentator put it.

But, as Barbara Brown Taylor has said about this passage, if we refuse to do this hard work, this spiritual surgery, as it were, it won't get us very far. She writes, "If your soul is crippled, then two good legs can't take you anywhere worth going." Amen