

Pass the Salt, Please

Mark 9:38-50

Ute Molitor; First Congregational UCC, Camden; September 30, 2018

Let's see here. I brought a saw and a gardening tool used to dig up weeds. The saw has a good blade for cutting bone! This other thing should do a good job on gouging out an eye, don't you think?! You heard the Gospel lesson for today: "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 go to hell, to the unquenchable fire (9:44)." Jesus supposedly said the same thing about cutting off feet and gouging out eyes. Since I am brand new, I thought I should demonstrate my eagerness to serve you even if circumstances call for unusual measures. So, if any of you would like me to take care of your eye, foot, or hand that is causing you to stumble or make others stumble, I'd be glad to help. Any takers? Just raise your hands! Might as well use them while you have them! Just kidding!

Goodness gracious, what a lectionary text for our first Sunday together. It is a rather loose collection of sayings with more content than I can fit into one sermon. I did not want to avoid it because I think the point about the challenge Jesus is making through it is that we must not avoid facing what is difficult and destructive in our lives. Let's see what the portrayed interaction between Jesus and the disciples might teach us about of our calling to grow as people of faith, individually and communally.

Thankfully, the early disciples keep showing us that we are not the only ones who stumble and fumble along the way. Last week's Gospel had them arguing over who was the greatest when Jesus is actually inviting them into mutual servanthood with a special care for the most vulnerable with whom God identifies (Mk 9:35). In today's text, the disciples stumble by trying to control someone outside their group who healed a person in Jesus' name, something they failed to do earlier in chapter 9:18. Jesus refuses to limit the power of the spirit to heal and transform to this particular "in-crowd" of disciples or, may we say, a particular denomination or even a particular religion as long as it is life-giving?

Jesus turns their attention back on the disciples to be on guard about the ways their own actions and responses might actually cause themselves or others to “stumble.” The Greek word that is translated here as “stumble” is *skandaleizein* which, as Sharon Ringe comments, expresses at its extreme “...being so horrified that one simply cannot remain in the place or go forward along the path where one had that experience.”¹ We are talking about experiencing a dramatic life changing break, something that is shifting our perception, our way of relating in our world, perhaps both toward ourselves and others. Such a scandal or stumbling can create great suffering, often even trauma, which may usher in a kind of death with or without the subsequent experience of new life or resurrection.

With this in mind, let’s return to Jesus saying that we should cut off our hands and feet if they cause us to stumble. What if Jesus is giving us a visual description of an actual experience in our lives? In other words, by making us imagine what it would mean to cut off a part of ourselves and experiencing our own horror in response to this image, we come to face to face with the pain of feeling or making someone else feel as though they have been cut off, injured, fractured, separated. We must take, what someone called “a long loving look at the real.”

Jesus goes on to say: “... it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, to the unquenchable fire (9:44).” It seems Jesus is saying that taking a look at the real is to be preferred any day to not facing it. It’s a different way of saying: “The truth shall set you free” even though facing it might be painful. The word translated as “hell” is *Gehenna* which was the name of the local garbage dump south of Jerusalem (– no yellow bags needed). So, if we don’t face how our actions affect our

¹ Sharon H. Ringe in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Westminster John Knox, 2009, p.119.

lives and that of others (and the wider creation), life can turn into living in a wasteland, a hell of our own making right here, right now.

The destructive consequences of climate change are becoming more and more apparent. People who have faced their addiction know all about wastelands and what it takes to get out of them. It often entails dealing with painful trauma. Their struggle is often just more obvious than other wastelands we can experience whether in our intimate relationships or communal life. One thing I have been impressed with is that you have actually taken this interim time to look at what was weakening your life together so as to rise up strengthened. There are, of course, many other contexts in which people are attempting to face hard truths.

I saw the film “Dawnlands” at the Camden International Film Festival, which described the efforts of the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in this country to name and address the suffering of Wabanaki Native American children. Many were removed from their ancestral homes right here in Maine and ‘given’ to white families to ‘civilize them.’ It was heart wrenching to listen to survivors talk about their struggles. They spoke of having their language and identity stripped away, being left to feel uprooted, cut off, worthless and ashamed. One woman even described trying to take baths with bleach water as she tried to whiten the color of her skin. A number of them were abused in other ways. This pain must be faced and addressed. Perhaps the title “Dawnland” did not only evoke that this land is greeted with the physical rising of the sun to the east. Maybe it was also expressing the faith that despite the hard process, some of the survivors experienced the dawn of healing by being heard.

All week the news has been dominated by the hearings on whether Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted Dr. Blasey-Ford. We are divided over whom to believe and partisan politics is making what is already tragic, confusing and painful virtually unbearable. All this is happening against the necessary but painful

backdrop of having to face and make visible, a social and cultural legacy of harassment and abuse against women without either presuming guilt or down-playing or dismissing the pain of abuse. We are faced with unmasking the spoken and unspoken mindsets that promote the objectification and exploitation of others. Gender conflicts are only one manifestation of this malaise.

Jesus offered a different vision and consciousness or mindset. He kept inviting people to envision the realm of God, or KINGdom of heaven, suggesting that we could at least taste it right here on earth. Jesus confronted and unmasked all abuse of power and control, including at the hands of the religious establishment. We can even say that Jesus “scandalized” others by teaching that nothing outside of the unconditional love of God bestowed on us has the power to define who and whose we are as creatures made in the image of God.² Jesus reached out the dispossessed and marginalized and insisted that healing and well-being were a free gift from God and not a commodity to be traded through a cult of sacrifice. As much as Jesus confronted injustice, he also refused to stop loving even those who opposed him and put him on a cross.³ All that was enough to stop people in their tracks, to confront them in a way that shook up their sense of identity and propriety and, most certainly, their image of God.

We can say that Jesus himself in a way causes us to stumble. However, he does not seek to harm us but to wake us up to a new way of seeing and living in the world. Are we willing to embrace his vision of a beloved community in which human struggles are met with love and support and abuse of power is named and confronted? Will we steadfastly follow Christ in dying to what destroys our common life and rising to what upholds it?

² As Jim Finley, a core teacher in the Living School (www.cac.org/livingschool) likes to say.

³ Keep in mind that Jesus and the disciples are actually traveling to Jerusalem. He keeps telling them that confrontation and suffering await him and, by implication, those who follow him (9:31). They will face the scandal of Jesus dying on a cross and must come to grips with their own actions and motivations as those who follow him.

At the end of our text, Jesus touches on the urgency and intensity of all this by using salt as a key metaphor. He tells his friends that they will be salted with fire. They will experience the trials of transformation as they deepen their journey of discipleship. Their lives are meant to be neither lukewarm nor bland. They are to have salt in them which has preserving power and was even used for forging covenants in ancient times (Lev 2:13). We also must not lose it, Jesus says, for: "... if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?"

People of God, I know that there is salt not only in this fine ocean air but in each and every one of your hearts. Part of what I hope we can do together in the time ahead is to ask what is making us now feel most alive or connected, salty and on fire as a community and as individuals. I would like to explore what spiritual practices and teachings can help us to preserve and sustain our shared ministry of both embracing and helping to transform the pain of the world, including our own. So let us "pass the salt" of love and compassion to each other. Let us use our eyes to see potential and recognize that of God which resides in all God has created. Let us use our feet together to walk toward each other across the threshold of our differences and, yet, to take a stand where we must. Let us reach out our hands to one another and embody what we truly are: the living body of Christ whose love sustains us today and every day. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.