

Matthew 15: 1-9

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

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." 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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.

"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. 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. 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. 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, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

For everyone will be salted with fire. 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."

Sept. 27, 2009

Matthew 15: 1-9

Mark 9:38-50

## Cut Off The Source!

A while back, maybe two or three years ago, there was a story in the news about a young man who was rock-climbing out in the desert. He slipped and fell. He ended up with his arm caught in a crevice between two huge boulders. He couldn't get out. Help did not come. He was going to die there.

He didn't want to die, so he resorted to a drastic measure. He cut off his arm. He cut off his arm and managed to get himself out of there and somehow he got to a place where he got the help he needed.

Living without one of his arms was better than dying with both arms intact.

Fortunately most of us are not faced with that choice. Very few people have to choose between maiming themselves or dying. But it happens.

It's hard to imagine having to make such a horrible decision. Sometimes we say things like "I'd rather die than" do whatever--- take a certain type of job, move to a given place, live in a specific situation, or have to go through a particular kind of experience. But, really, when it comes right down to it, would you?

Rather die, that is? Human beings are very resilient and resourceful. We can live through an incredible number of undesirable situations, undergo immense suffering, live through horrible tragedies, and still go on living.

The will to live, you might call it instinct, that drive to stay alive ---is strong. Strong enough that an athletic young man sacrificed one of his arms to stay alive. Strong enough that we would give up many things before we would be willing to die.

Our second reading this morning comes from the Gospel according to Mark. As we read Mark, we learn that by this point in his life Jesus has already walked on water, that the Transfiguration has already happened, that the disciples tried to heal a boy of seizure disorder and could not, but Jesus could.

Then Jesus foretold his death and resurrection for the second time, followed immediately by the disciples arguing among themselves over who was the greatest. Jesus responded to that by bringing a little child in front of them and telling them that the last shall be first.

The disciples had a really hard time getting it. They just didn't understand Jesus' message. Despite seeing miracle after miracle, despite knowing that Jesus is the Son of God, despite being told that the first shall be last and despite seeing Jesus accept all kinds of people, they still didn't get it.

They wanted to stop a man from casting out demons in Jesus' name because that man was not part of their inner circle. He was not one of their chosen group, so they wanted him to cease and desist.

Jesus explained to them, "if he is not against us, he is for us." "Anyone who does great deeds of power in my name won't be able to say a bad word about me."

Jesus knew that there were other people who heard and saw and believed in him. The disciples, the twelve chosen, were not the only ones who understood anything about Jesus. The problem was, they didn't understand enough. They still thought they were in an exclusive group, that they were "in" and other people were "out." And even among themselves in the "in" group, they were concerned about who was the greatest!

So Jesus resorted to exaggeration, to hyperbole, to make a point----"don't get in the way of anyone who believes. Don't be a stumbling block by telling them they can't heal in my name. Don't tell them they are less than you because you are my chosen ones. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to go astray, pluck it out."

Jesus didn't mean this literally. What was causing his disciples to sin was not their hands or their eyes. So what was it?

It was their pride, their self-centeredness, their self-consciousness. They were so focussed on what position they would hold in the Kingdom of God, on who would sit at the right hand of Jesus, and who on the left, that they forgot to focus on what was important----they forgot to focus on Jesus!

It wasn't their hands or their feet or their eyes that needed to be cut off. It was their egos. It was their short-sightedness. It was their closed-mindedness.

That was what was causing them to sin. That was what was getting in the way between them and God. That was what kept them from loving God with their whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Not a body part, but selfishness, a focus on themselves, a failure to put other people first.

Jesus ends this passage by telling them three things about salt. At first, these sayings seem strange and confusing, and maybe it seems like they don't have anything to do with each other or with cutting off limbs.

But they do.

Salt in ancient times was indispensable. More than just a seasoning, salt was used to keep food from spoiling and becoming unfit to eat. Salt was thrown onto sacrifices in the Temple before they were thrown into the fire. Salt was important to health in an arid region where water was scarce, helping people to retain the water they drank. Salt was a preservative, a purifier, and it was life-sustaining.

So when Jesus said, “Everyone will be salted with fire”, he was saying that we would all be purified, that we would all be tested. No one is better than anyone else. This is something that we will ALL go through. Not one of us can avoid it, no matter who we are, or how close we are to Jesus.

And when Jesus referred to salt losing its saltiness, it's not as confusing as it sounds. Salt taken from the Dead Sea contains many other minerals and many other types of salts that do not taste salty. Salt can be purified to remove these other, tasteless, things, but if salt contains too many of these impurities, it does not taste salty.



If we are contaminated with too many impurities that are not of God, we are no longer useful as the Salt of the Earth. We are no longer useful in doing what we are created to do---to love God and neighbor.

The impurities are selfishness, greed, fear, hate, pride, and other sins.

Jesus ends this passage by saying, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." To have salt in yourselves means that you are purified and preserved from being spoiled by things that are of the world, that are not of God.

Be at peace, he says. Accept each other, don't argue over who is the greatest, over who is right and who is wrong, over who has the right to claim the name of Christ and who does not. Be at peace with each other!

This was good news for the first hearers of the Gospel according to Mark! In the first century there were a lot of boundaries among the early Christians. Some said you had to become Jewish and follow all of the Law in order to be a Christian.

And I am sure that there were people who claimed to have a closer connection to Christ than others, especially between those who had heard Christ speak in person and those who had heard the Good News second hand. It was all too easy to judge each other based on one litmus test or another---too easy to draw lines between people.

People believed different things about Jesus. They believed that they should worship in different ways. They had a lot of differences.

These differences and the judgments about each other based on those differences divided the early church.

Today we are divided into different denominations based on our different beliefs, and we judge each other based on those beliefs. We also judge each other on the ways we choose to worship, and on the ways we live out our faith. So this passage is good news to us, too!

Any word from Christ that brings us together is good news!  
And if we are all together, then we are all together for good or for bad, in our suffering and in God's glory!

We will ALL be judged! We will all be tested and purified! There is no one who is so good that they are above or beyond being tested.

The rain falls on everyone, and the sun shines on everyone. Good stuff and bad stuff happens to all of us. There is no distinction between us. None of us are better or more loved by God than others of us.

If we are together in this world, in our human condition, then we are together in the love and grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ!

What we need to do is not to cut off our offending, sinful limbs or pluck out our eyes when they lead us into temptation.

What we need to cut off, to get rid of, to empty ourselves of, is our selfishness, our greed, our pride and our focus on ourselves.

Instead of seeing others as wrong or bad or scary, we can teach our eyes to see each other the way God sees us, as God's beloved children. Instead of violence and destruction, we can teach our hands and our feet to do the work needed to build God's kingdom, whether it's feeding the poor or working for justice.

Instead of speaking words of hate and fear, we can teach our mouths to announce the Good News and to speak words of love and encouragement.

What we need to do is to cut off the source of our sins, to cut off the supply of judgment, to stop hating and fearing each other. We need to take off the hardened part, the calloused part, the cynical and skeptical and frightened part of ourselves and get rid of it so we can stop living in hell and start recognizing the Kingdom of God that is within us and among us!

What we need to do is to grow closer to the heart of God, to allow our hearts to form their natural shape, the image of God's heart!

We can do that by spending time in prayer, praying to know in the deepest part of ourselves that God loves us no matter what we have done. When we know that we are loved beyond the shadow of a doubt, then we are capable of letting that love flow through us to others.

When we know that God's justice means that everyone gets what they need, then we will stop being stingy and jealous and mean.

When we know that God's mercy means that no one gets what they deserve, then we will stop wishing others would get what's coming to them!

When we know that God's grace means that EVERYONE gets more love and forgiveness and hope than they imagined in their wildest imaginations, then we will be living without fear, without greed, without selfishness, without judgment.

The scribes and the Pharisees judged others to be unworthy if they didn't wash their hands properly. They lived by rules that God never made and they expected everyone else to do the same. They had forgotten that God's heart is big enough for all of us, for all of creation.

That is what led them into sin, that hardness, that blindness.

Like the young man who cut off his arm to escape from being trapped between the rock and the hard place, we need to take drastic steps to live the full and abundant life that Christ came to bring us, that God created us to have!

Cut off the hardness! Cut off the blindness! Cut off the fear and the judging! Cut off the source of your pain and your loneliness!

Open your hearts and minds to God's grace and love and joy and hope!

Let us pray-----

Infinite, eternal God, we pray for help to become the people you created us to be. Remind us what it means to be made in your image, and help us to see that image when we look into the mirror. Help us to see others as you see them, as your beloved children. Lead us to love and not fear. Open our hearts and minds so that we might understand that the Kingdom of God truly is among us and within us.

Amen.