

Proper 21, Year B
St Mark's, Tampa
27 September 2009

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

I don't know if you've noticed, but the disciples have been coming in for some very rough treatment lately in Mark's Gospel. Two weeks ago Jesus called Peter "Satan." Then last week the disciples got in trouble for arguing about which of them was the greatest. And today Jesus rebukes the disciples for trying to stop an exorcist who is "not one of us."

What makes today's Gospel particularly striking is that earlier in this same chapter the disciples themselves had *failed* to perform an exorcism. So they're looking really bad here. They can't manage to cast out a demon themselves, but they're trying to stop someone who can, for no better reason than that he's not one of them.

Jesus simply won't have this. He tells the disciples not to stop the exorcist. This part gets off to a promising start. There's some wonderfully reassuring stuff, the sort of inclusiveness and all-it-takes-is-a-kind-gesture business in which we Episcopalians specialize these days. But then it turns nasty, and people are getting thrown into the sea with great millstones around their neck and mutilating themselves. What do we do with all *that*?

It's too easy, too cheap, to soften this passage by writing off the vivid language as mere metaphor. The metaphors are too brutal for that. Jesus wouldn't have picked such shocking language if he hadn't meant to say something really jarring and unexpected, something we're not really prepared to hear.

I think we're not prepared to hear that anything really hinges on our spiritual lives. We're not prepared to hear that the stakes are high. We're not prepared to hear that what we're about as followers of Jesus is serious. We're not prepared to hear that we can do lasting damage, incalculable damage, by putting obstacles in other people's way. We're not prepared to hear that God wants everything from us. We're not prepared to hear that nothing, nothing at all, matters more than entering the kingdom of heaven, and that we have to be ready to get rid of anything that puts an obstacle on our way into that kingdom.

Jesus is probably saying more than that, but I'm certain that he's not saying any less than that. And that's enough – that's more than enough – for most of us to handle hearing.

First Jesus tells us that if we put an obstacle in the way of a child, it would be better for us to have a great millstone hung around our necks and be thrown into the sea. Note what he's saying. Not: you *will* have a millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea, but: the consequences to you if you cause a child to stumble will be so grave that you'll *wish* you had got away with something comparatively trivial like death by millstone.

In that, Jesus is talking about the serious consequences of putting obstacles in the way of other people. He then goes on to talk about the serious consequences of allowing obstacles to remain in our own way. Better to cut off a hand or a foot, better to tear out an eye, and enter the kingdom of heaven wounded but alive, than to turn our backs on life altogether, to be cast into the unquenchable fire.

It's *that* serious. If a friendship, or a job, or a habit, or a hobby puts an obstacle in your way, get rid of it.

Those who heard Jesus would have understood the image for "hell, the unquenchable fire." The Greek word for hell here is *Gehenna*, the valley of Hinnon, outside Jerusalem. It was the place where garbage was gathered and burned. The stakes are so high, Jesus is saying, that if we let ourselves be diverted from the goal, we are fit for nothing but to be tossed on the garbage heap and incinerated.

The stakes are high, the consequences are grave, and the outcome is eternal. If we can believe that, even a little bit, we have all the motivation we need to avoid putting stumbling-blocks in other people's way, to get rid of the stumbling-blocks that are in our own way. But then we have to ask, what *are* those stumbling-blocks? What, specifically, is Jesus warning us against here?

Well, what are the big issues that have prompted these sobering remarks? The disciples have been sparring with each other about who is the greatest. They have tried to exclude someone who wasn't following them. (And isn't that weird, by the way? They don't say to Jesus, "He wasn't following *you*." They say, "He wasn't following *us*.") So what are the stumbling-blocks? Rivalry. Pretensions to greatness. Quarreling. Exclusion. Trying to draw the boundaries of the kingdom too tightly, so that it excludes the unaccredited, those who may claim to be following Jesus but sure as heck aren't following *us*.

Instead of all this contentiousness, Jesus says, be at peace with one another. And that's where the reading from James really comes alive for me, because James offers a picture of a church that has removed the stumbling-blocks, a church that is truly at peace. He

doesn't say, "Are any among you suffering? They should convene a grievance committee and issue a ten-part communiqué." No. Those who are suffering should pray. Those who are cheerful should break out into song. Those who are sick should seek prayer and anointing. We should "confess our sins to one another" – in other words, we should be honest about how we have failed one another – not so we can fight about it, but so we can pray for one another.

I had intended for this sermon to take a more cheerful turn at this point: *See how we started with a word of judgment, but we've come around to peace and harmony!* But that wouldn't be altogether honest. Because *not* quarreling with one another, *not* competing with one another, *not* suspecting one another isn't natural for us. I mean, what about, "Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise." What kind of songs would those be? 'Cause they had better be the right kind of songs, the kind of songs *my* people sing, because the kind of stuff *those people* like is just not going to cut it. And that business about confessing our sins to one another – well that's all very nice in theory, but if you knew what those people did to me . . . And as for those who aren't doing Christianity in the right way, our way – those who aren't following *us* – you don't really expect me to be at peace with *them!*

Giving up all that, well, it would feel like – oh, now I get it – it would feel like cutting off a hand or tearing out an eye.

How can we possibly be expected to give up all that? And yet, if we don't, we really are fit for the rubbish-heap, aren't we?

It is going to be hard to grasp the truth that the stakes are high. That what we're about as followers of Jesus is serious. That we can do lasting damage, incalculable damage, by putting obstacles in other people's way. It is going to be hard to grasp the truth that God wants everything from us. That nothing, nothing at all, matters more than entering the kingdom of heaven. That we have to be ready to get rid of anything that puts an obstacle on our way into that kingdom, including the rivalry and competitiveness and factionalism that are as dear to us as our own hands and feet and eyes.

Drastic measures may be required of us. We may have to enter the kingdom wounded and lame. But hey, that just means we'll fit right in. I hear the King is pretty banged up himself.