

Mark 9:38-50

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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The Body of Christ

Well good morning, my friends, and welcome again to this service of worship. This is actually the last sermon (hopefully) that I will preach alone in this sanctuary. Next week we are going to be live and some of you will be here. Others will be at home, but as always we will be together. Connected, engaged, and worshipping God. It won't be perfect, but it will be good and holy. And for that I am deeply grateful.

So, about that Scripture text I just read. Sheesh. Most of you know that as a preacher, I follow the lectionary. There are usually four to six texts that I can choose from to preach. Always an Old Testament text and a psalm, usually an epistle, and of course, always a text from one of the gospels.

And well, sometimes I get to a week like this one and think what if I didn't follow the lectionary. What if I just chose the texts that felt good or were easy to unpack and had a straightforward message? But what would be the fun in that, huh?

Okay, so this is what I want to do: I want to unpack some of the stuff in this text because it doesn't feel right to ignore it. And to do that I am going to try to help us locate this text within the wider narrative in Mark's gospel. It may feel a little "teachery," but I do think there is ultimately a word for us behind all this gruesome language.

First, let's talk about hell, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. What an image, am I right? The word Jesus uses here is Gehenna, which is an actual place. It is the name of a valley on the southeast side of Jerusalem. Historically, it was a site where followers of the god Molech sacrificed children.

After this practice was outlawed by the King Josiah, sometime in 600 BCE, it became basically a dump. Not just for everyday refuse, but also for the bodies of animals and most notably people who had been executed for crime. And since decaying bodies are quite stinky, they used fire to consume these bodies.

So, Gehenna, or as it's known to us, Hell, was an actual valley of horror, full of people who were determined to be criminals, sentenced to death, and then cremated.

Of course, later on the collective spiritual imagination took this worldly place and relocated it to some spiritual realm that we might be cast into if we are bad, or at the very least if we do not conform to a certain standard of belief.

To be honest, it is not clear to me what Jesus had in mind when he spoke these words: whether he meant an earthly pit of doom or a fiery afterlife. Frankly, they both sound pretty terrible.

So let's move to the next troubling part of this text and that is the word about "stumbling blocks." The Greek here is *skandalon*, which you guessed it is like its English cognate, scandalize. It has a connotation of trapping someone or causing someone to sin.

Jesus tells his followers that anyone who does this to a little one, which could mean literally children and it could also mean people who are new to the movement, anyone who scandalizes a little one is basically deserving of execution.

In fact, if one's hand or foot or eye causes them to stumble, they should cut it off, tear it out, for that is better than being cast into Gehenna.

Are we having fun yet? No? Me either.

Here's where it gets tricky for me. First, I do not believe that corporal punishment, self-inflicted or through the carceral state, is conducive to the message of the gospel. Prisons are not places where people grow or transform. Prisons don't make us safer or better off as a people. Prisons create and deepen physical, spiritual, emotional, communal separation, which according to theologian Paul Tillich, is the definition of sin.

The fifth commandment is: thou shalt not kill. Jesus is quoted for saying things like, "Let all the prisoners go free," and the Apostle Paul asserts that through Christ, God is making all things new. And he exhorts us never to return evil for evil.

How then are we to understand or reconcile all this with Jesus' instructions for corporal punishment and execution?

I think the first, and perhaps most important thing to consider is that the gospel of Mark was written at minimum 30 years after Jesus died. It was written to a community of believers who had never even met Jesus, but who inherited this movement and tried to make sense of it, to grow it, to live as faithfully into the kingdom of God as they could possibly muster.

We know from Paul's letters, that there were competing interpretations. There were fights, both intellectual and physical. There were scandals and abuses and violence committed within these communities of believers, and what we have is a glimpse into that struggle. That very human struggle, which every single one of us knows, where we seek to be good and just and live according to the ways of the kingdom of God, and also, we live in a world that is broken.

The word that sticks out to me most in this text is this: there were people outside the immediate community of Jesus and his disciples who were exorcising demons, which at that time meant bringing healing, physical, spiritual, and communal healing. And they were doing it in Jesus' name, which at that time meant they were doing in according what he stood for. What he was about. That's what it means to do something in someone's name.

And the disciples were offended by this. They tried to stop them. But Jesus says: whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever is not against us, is for us.

This stands out to me, my friends, because in the others gospels, Jesus responds: whoever is not with me is against me.

Do you perceive the distinction here? Jesus is saying that it doesn't matter if these folx are a part of our immediate community or not, what matters is the work they are doing.

So, what does this mean for us, the body of Christ in San Jose, CA in the year of our Lord, 2021? Well, I think that it means we are called to build a coalition that is multicultural, multiracial, and multi-faith, because whoever is not against us is for us. And there are many people in our community who share our vision for a just and beautiful San Jose, where there is enough housing, enough food, enough care, enough joy for every single person in our midst.

One of the most prevalent themes in the gospel of Mark is the ever-expanding community of God. And I truly believe that the more folx we count as "us," the stronger and more faithful we will become.

The aspiration we have for this world is that it be full of love and joy and care for all, that the kingdom of God would know no bounds. This doesn't mean, however, that along the way, there won't be boundaries and accountability.

For those who are causing harm. Tearing down the community. Abusing their power. Hurting God's little ones. Stomping on God's Creation. Well, Jesus declares that they must be held accountable.

I don't think the idea of cutting off a hand or foot or eye is literal here. I think the gospel writer is using the body metaphor. The body of Christ is made up of many members. And all members work together to bring healing and wholeness and joy to the entire body. Paul says when one suffers, all suffers, when one rejoices, all rejoice.

But when one member consistently and unrepentantly harms another member of the body, that member doesn't get to remain. Now, as an abolitionist, I do not advocate for them being thrown into a fiery pit, either in this world or the next, however, I believe that there can still be and must accountability when harm has been done.

One who causes harm may be stripped of positions of power or authority. They may be called to make reparation. They may be called to repent, to turn back to the ways of God, and seek to do what is just and right going forward, or they do get to remain a part of the body, where they can continue to cause harm.

As the body of Christ, we are called to take care of all of the members, and that means that we are called to hold accountable those who cause harm.

We can do that by holding our elected leaders and policy makers accountable when the laws and policies they put into place cause harm to the little ones in our midst.

Or by holding our neighbors, our friends, our family, accountable when they cause harm with words or actions.

Or even by holding ourselves accountable, digging deep down to root out and prune away those beliefs and actions which cause harm.

My friends, we are the body of Christ. We are all of us, being made new. Being salted with fire, brought closer to God and to who we truly are. All of us. Know that and work for justice. Know that and love fiercely. Know that and be at peace.

In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.