

19th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.3.21

Mark 9:43-50

‘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.’ (191)

I’m thinking of the game we used to play as children. I’m not sure what it’s called. “Hot and Cold.” Something like that.

The person who was “it” would think of some thing—best if something in the room.

The one who was “it” would continue to think of that thing, and everyone else would guess at what it is.

People would yell out the things of the room. “Piano!” “Chalice.” “Light switches.” And the one who is “it” would say “warmer” if the guess was close, or “colder” if the guess was far off.

Whether spatially close or conceptually close was up to the one who was “it.”

If the guess was really out there, the one who is “it” would get silly. “Freezing.” “So, so cold.” If the guess was really close: “Boiling.” “So hot!”

Once the guess was right on (“Cross!” “Yup!”) the winner would be “it” for the next round.

Jesus is thinking in terms of that old game we used to play. “Hot and Cold.” Stumbling-blocks. Causes of stumbling. The things that get you far from God, when God wants you to be close, very close. You’ve got to let those things go. You’ve got to let go those things in life that lead you far from God. Whatever they are. Let them go.

Sacrifice. It’ll be worth it, I promise.

This section of Mark’s gospel is a collection of teachings about status issues, power and domination and the way of grace. These two chapters, nine and ten: this collection of teachings about status is framed by Jesus’ stating that the first will be last and the last will be first.

Twice he says it, twice the disciples struggle with the concept. They’d argue amongst themselves as to who was greatest. They’d misunderstand but not ask for clarification because they were afraid. This is the longest of the three teaching cycles, these grab-bags of sayings Jesus is

remembered to have said, and together they touch on the greatest and the least, insiders and outsiders, aggressors and victims, males and females, adults and children, the rich and the poor. Together they all suggest that power plays out very differently amidst the reign of God.

The little ones. In the reign of God, there is a preference for the little ones. They're shown favor. They're shown succor, special treatment. And woe unto those who cause any of the little ones to stumble. Woe unto any who'd further weaken those already weak, who'd further exploit those who were already vulnerable to exploitation. Woe unto any who'd use power to dominate the powerless, to humiliate the already lowly or shamed.

Because this is going to be hard enough as it is. This life of faith that comes of following Christ: this is going to be hard enough as it is. For, suddenly, with Jesus, it was no longer about engaging in the right practices. It was no longer about adhering precisely, perfectly to the law. It was no longer about associating with the right people or understanding the right things. Now the life of faith would be about something altogether less clear. It would be about following a savior whose way is so thoroughly self-giving as to end up crucified, killed in the most shameful way, killed as one so utterly bereft and God-forsaken, and yet then God-risen, yet then raised to live forever more. This shamed one is the risen one. This forsaken one is the fulfilled one.

This itself could cause people to stumble. After all, people like respectability—so they'll follow in what seems respectable, lends respectability. People like glory and glittering things, and moreover we believe in such things because they're easy to believe in. It's easy to believe that all that glitters is good, that what looks good *is* good—and therefore what is good must look good.

Every few years or so, a drawing of Jesus circulates, a rendering of his face that's based on phenotypical facial features for a 1st century Middle Eastern man. Published about twenty years ago, drawn by a medical artist who used skulls discovered on archeological digs from that place and era, the picture presents Jesus as human. Not handsome as a movie star, not glowing as an actual star, it's just a human man's face—eyes a little asymmetrical, hair and beard a little scruffy, cheeks puffy, forehead creased.

It's always fun to see who's offended by how ordinary Jesus is imaged to have been.

It's usually the more vocal “believers” who freak out at Jesus looking ordinary.

Just so, the gospel of Jesus Christ, horrifically crucified though also beloved, as revealed in his being raised, could itself be too much for people to take in, could itself leave people in a scandalized state.

That's the word for it, the Greek original, four times mentioned in this passage alone, *scandalizo* or *skandalon*. You can hear in it the English "scandal" or "scandalize," something Jesus seems to have understood as a deep potential in what he had to reveal. It would scandalize the people. *He* would scandalize the people. The son of God crucified would be a stumbling block, would cause many would-be followers to desert him or fall away. It was an enormous concern of his, according to all the gospel narratives, but especially according to Mark.

Like, earlier, in the 4th chapter, Jesus is remembered to have said of the seeds that fall on rocky soil, "...they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they *fall away*." *Scandalizo*.

And, later, in the 14th chapter, Jesus is remembered to have said to the disciples, "You will all *become deserters*..." though Peter said to him, "Even though all *become deserters*, I will not..." which isn't true. Even Peter would desert Jesus, desert through denial. Even Peter would *scandalizo*.

Another time, in the 6th chapter, the people of Galilee asked, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they *took offense* at him." *Scandalizo*.

See, it was going to happen as it was.

So, those who weren't scandalized, those who could follow in faith, should loathe becoming a cause for scandal in others, should loathe becoming a stumbling block and further hindering those already having a hard time.

Don't make it so your faith practice intimidates others from finding their own faith practice. Don't make it so you're such a model of the faith that others are put off from following as well.

This week, at rowing camp, where I literally rowed my hands off, the coaches were all either Olympians of the past or Olympic hopefuls for the future. They'd pull up beside us as we were rowing along down Lake Hosmer. They'd pull up beside *me* as I labored along, headwind, tailwind, no wind. Their watching, their puttering along in the launch boat beside me: it might have put a chill on what I was working on. In fact, it usually did. Trying to get my stroke rate up, trying to get my drive more solid so the recovery was more stable, I'd see an Olympian come along and I'd shy away from those attempts. But they were all gracious, none shaming. You don't have to be aiming for the Olympics to have worthy goals for your own attempts. They knew that. There's nothing wrong with being a rowing hobbyist. They knew that.

Here, in the passage we just heard, the scandal that the accomplished in the faith might have presented to those newer to the faith is imaged as a stumbling block, the sort of thing that can't be overcome. And woe unto any who put up stumbling blocks to new ones in the faith. It would better to have such a stumbling block tied around your neck while you're thrown into the sea than letting someone else trip up on it.

See, it's *that* important that people find their way to closeness with God.

It's *that* important. True of others. True of ourselves.

Did you notice that Jesus' concern about people falling away from intimacy with God shifts from what concern we should hold for others to what concern we should hold for ourselves? "...If your hand causes you to stumble..." "If your eye causes you to stumble..." Be careful about the faith of others. Be careful about your own faith. Take care of yourselves, little ones. Be gentle with yourselves, little ones.

The language in these statements might well have put you off, indeed might well have been a stumbling block, something that prevents you from hearing gospel news in this. Jesus is remembered to have used strong language about some scary images, strong language about so-called hell.

Gehenna is the word in Greek for it, a word that came to name a spiritual realm. But it more accurately names an actual place. Gehenna was a dump outside Jerusalem, often on fire for burning through waste. More crucially, it was founded on a still more ancient site where it's said children were sacrificed to the Babylonian god Ba'al, then often on fire for a gruesome practice, burnt live offerings, chosen for their physical perfection, their being without blemish. This is to say hell is a place of misbegotten religious practice. What's more, it's a misbegotten practice that the God of the Hebrews liberated the people from practicing. The God of the Hebrews, the God of the Jews, the God of Jesus: no longer must such a practice take place.

In this way, then, Christianity does indeed save us from hell because the hellish practice of destructive religion (the sacrifice of others) is to be no more.

Please understand, there's nearly nothing in scripture that supports the notion that there's a place of eternal torment for anyone after we die. What there is of this is found in the book, Revelation, which nearly no one of any scholarly or spiritual seriousness regards as more authoritative than the gospels, the letters of Paul, not to mention the whole of the Old Testament. In short, there is no biblical reason to believe in hell as a place of eternal torment.

As for the more historically bound understanding of hell, as a place of live burnt offerings, live burnt sacrifice, even this shall fall away when comes the Christian conviction that our lives are to be a sacrifice to God. Death isn't sanctifying; life is. We're not to present ourselves as sacrifices to death, perfect, without blemish, but as living sacrifices, lives given over to the God who is love, in all our lameness and imperfection. And as salt is an instrument in the fallen away practice of burnt offerings, we're to have salt within ourselves, a sanctifying way of living, salt within ourselves so to have peace with one another.

The doing of this, though, could well involve us giving up some things, giving up whatever things might draw us away from God.

With this in mind, then, different sects of the church have configured what those things are to be. The Brethren, therefore, are not to dance. The Methodists and the Baptists are not to drink alcohol. The Catholics aren't to eat meat on Fridays. The Amish don't use zippers or electricity or automatic machines. Congregationalists have sworn off swearing and rowdy behavior or carousing. Et cetera. Et cetera.

What follows is that these things come to be thought of as wrong in and of themselves, things to be avoided because they are in their essence sinful, maybe even evil.

But, sad to say, it's actually more complicated than that. For these things aren't sinful in and of themselves, to say nothing of evil. It's just that these things might have felt as misguiding to some certain influential person, and from that it became policy. Because *I* must get to bed early in order not to be overwhelmed the next day, a little sad, maybe even depressed, now everyone in my sect must go to bed early because it's deemed good. Or because *you* don't watch scary movies because they really disturb you, now everyone over whom you have influence must conform to your way, now that it's been established as right.

Our task is more complicated because it comes to each of us, ourselves or within our communities, to discern what it is that leads us away from the love of God, the grace of God, and what it is that leads us close into God's heart.

Where do we go cold, and where do we get warmer?

That's for us to decide. That's for you to decide. That's for you to *discern*.

You might even try that as a prayer practice. Recognize what God feels like, in the living of your days, in the moving and working of your body or of your household or community. Then recognize when that feeling of God is filling to you, and when it feels to have emptied out or gone cold. Then, do more of the former things, and less of the latter.

I like to row. I like to row and row and row, until my hands bleed, until my muscles ache. It makes me feel good and strong. It makes me feel awake and aware. It makes me feel glad I have the body I have, which hasn't always made me feel glad.

When they were old enough, the boys followed me into a boat. Tobias tried it, was good at it, still does it. Jack tried it, hated it, and said as much. "So don't do it," I told him, and he never has since. Lately he's been playing Magic the Gathering with his dad. He loves it.

There's good news in that this great wide world is full of God's grace. It's good news that there is hardly a place where we could go beyond God's spirit. We can't go anywhere to flee from God's blessing presence. Even at the farthest limits of the sea, God's hand shall lead us, God's holding shall enfold us.

But this isn't to say this wholeness will be felt as wholeness to everyone. For some, living in community is the fullness of life. For others, living in solitude is the fullness of life. For some, being a parent is the fullness of creativity. For others, creativity comes of other means. For some, sharing a bottle of wine with friends at the end of a day is to celebrate. For others, a bottle of wine is but the beginning of a drowning sorrow or harrowing hardship. For some, traveling, adventuring is a theological, spiritual pursuit. For others, staying in place and going deep is a spiritual practice. For some working for justice is to manifest God in this world, for others prayer and worship are to manifest God in the world. There are so many ways to glorify God. So, take care, little ones, to find the ways that are your ways. Take care, little ones, to find your way to God—for I am thinking of a thing that is here in this room and you must guess what it is.

You're getting warmer.

You're getting warmer.

Thanks be to God.