

Proper 21 B, September 27, 2009
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Mark 9:38—50

An Arm and a Leg, a Hand and an Eye, a Life

It is another day at Capernaum Theological Seminary, another day after many lessons where the students never quite get what the teacher has been presenting. Last week we heard about the students after class arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus makes His point, **“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all”** (Mark 9:35). To emphasize His point Jesus takes a child and puts him in the midst of them. Jesus then tells the disciples that bending down to serve this child is what greatness in God’s kingdom is all about. In other words, to receive a little child in Jesus’ name is to receive Jesus Himself, as well as the Father. Jesus’ point is that the concept of greatness is upside down and inside out when measured by the cross to which Jesus is going.

Even while the words of Jesus echoed around the Seminary and that child roamed the halls, Student John comes in with a report: **“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”** John and those with him were not going to allow any unauthorized demon-casting.

It sounds all too familiar. Like John and the disciples, the Church has tried so many times to trademark and copyright Jesus, to institutionalize Him, to tame and fence in the Holy Spirit, to domesticate the Gospel—all so we can bring everything under the safety of our control. There are times when the Church—be it the local congregation or a synod—is more interested in

credentials and constitutions than it is the Gospel and the Confessions of Faith. Like John ignoring the fact that the man was doing everything in the name of Jesus, we often ignore the fact that God is often sneaky, subversive, and acting through His agents scattered all over the place. That means, as a friend of mine has said, that evangelism is really archaeology and not strip mall development. The first act of evangelism and mission is listening, finding out what God has been up to before we showed up. You might find the anonymous exorcist without the credentials, or it might be the pious grandmother in Russia who baptized her grandchildren after the churches were destroyed and the priests taken away. It may be the stranger who speaks a gentle Gospel word while sharing a cup of water.

It all comes down to the difference between our way and God's way. Our way: whoever isn't for us is against us. God's way through Jesus: "For one who is not against us is for us." You see, this Seminary in Capernaum will soon close, because Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to die on a cross and to take the entire world with Him into His death. His disciples see themselves as an exclusive club; Jesus sees Himself as an inclusive Savior who dies for the sin of the world—a Savior of the world. When He is lifted up on the cross, He draws all humanity in His death. That's what John, the Church, and what we so often fail to understand.

And in failing to comprehend that Christ has worked redemption for the whole world, we sometimes knowingly or even unknowingly place stumbling blocks in people's faith. And here is where the lesson about the Arm and a Leg, a Hand and an Eye, and a Life comes in. Jesus gives a dire warning: **"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."**

You see, Jesus is concerned with stumbling from faith, which is to scandalize, to put stumbling blocks in people's faith. His point: Anyone who causes a humble believer in Jesus, a little one of faith, to stumble in his or her trust in Jesus, a millstone and the deep sea are only what is deserved. To be sure, some people will be scandalized by the Gospel, scandalized by the fact that every sin and every sinner is forgiven in the one death of Jesus, scandalized by the fact that they are saved not by their good works but by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. They should be scandalized by the Gospel and not by us.

Scandalize as a falling from faith helps us understand what Jesus says next. **“If your hand causes (*scandilizo*) you to sin,”** scandalizes you, that is, causes you not to believe in Jesus, you would be better off cutting it off and entering life with one hand than to burn in hell with two. The same goes for your foot, your eye. But notice, Jesus says nothing about the ear, for faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17), not by seeing, by doing, or by walking.

Now be careful here. If Jesus were talking about sin, there would be a lot of one-eyed, one-handed, one-footed people here this morning; and yet we would still be sinning with the remaining eye, hand, and foot. Eyes, hands, and feet don't cause you to sin. It is the heart that is the source of sin (Matthew 15:19). And Jesus doesn't suggest that we carve out our hearts—He does that Himself when He dies for us.

If the work of your hands scandalizes you, causes you to doubt that you are justified by faith in Jesus and not by works, it would be better that you not be able to anything at all. If what you see with your eye causes you to doubt God's promise that you are saved in the death of Jesus, it

would be better that you not see at all. If your feet take you along a path that causes you to doubt that Jesus is the way through death to eternal life, then it would be better that you not walk at all. Better to lose everything, your eye, your hand, your foot, your whole life, than to stumble in your trust in Jesus. And that's because Jesus is the only way. His death and resurrection are all you have and all you need to make it through your death to resurrection, let alone through this life. Our way is no alternative at all—dying worms and unquenchable fire.

All of which leads to one more lesson for these seminarians, these disciples. **“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”**

Puzzled? Perhaps because we are not accustomed to sacrifices. In biblical times, sacrifices were sprinkled with salt before they were burned up. Salt purifies, flavors, and preserves—symbols of purity. When Jesus says **“everyone will be salted with fire,”** He is saying that everyone dies. Everyone is offered as a sacrifice to God. It's that whole wages of sin thing for everyone. What purifies the sacrifice of our death, flavoring it and preserving it to make it acceptable to God is the salt of Jesus' own death and resurrection. His dying for our sin and His rising for our justification is the salt we need in our lives.

That is no ordinary salt. Salt in those times was dredged from the shores of the Dead Sea. It was a mixture of gypsum and sodium chloride. If you took away the sodium chloride, the ingredient that gives it taste, you would have nothing but a bland and bitter dust. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus for the life of the world, Christianity would be bland, tasteless, insipid religion, with no purification for sin.

But with the salt of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are at peace with God, and we can be at peace with one another. There is no need to trust our works, our path, our vision. We trust Jesus and His Word, His Way, His Life. And His life gives us life.

With thanks to Bill Cwirla for textual insights.

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