

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

82nd Sunday of Pandemic - Masked Service

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

09/26/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

38John said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” 39But 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. 40Whoever is not against us is for us. 41For 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. 42“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. 43If 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. 45And 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. 47And 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, 48where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49“For everyone will be salted with fire. 50Salt 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Stumbling's

Good morning! It seems that every generation is plagued by idiotic things that catch on and are repeated by young and naive kids across the world. Fortunately for me, we didn't have cameras to film our mistakes. For some strange reason during my time in middle school, a harmful trend caught on with the people I ran around with. Funnily enough, all you needed was water and some salt. We would take regular old table salt and pour a small pile on our hands or arm. We would then take an ice cube and set it in the salt... and see how long we could last. I'm not sure why, I took wood-shop, not chemistry, but the result was that the two would create a chemical reaction, leaving a burn mark on your hand. The goal was to see who could be the "toughest" and withstand the pain the longest.

Disturbingly, it still continues, sometimes popping up as a "viral trend" online, even with its roots clearly existing long before social media. Again, I was young and stupid, cut me some slack. But I forgot all about those less than stellar decisions until this week when I was thinking about the ending of our Gospel reading. Clearly, salt can be a strong reminder of a lesson learned.

This may come as a surprise, but even I don't always remember what I preached three years ago when we last heard this text. I make it a habit of not going back to my previous sermon so that I can approach the text fresh

and without a bias of what I said before. So, I'm not sure what I said last time, but I certainly don't remember struggling like I did this go-around. It started off innocently, as one person said on Monday afternoon: "It's pretty straight forward, cut out the sin in your life." But as we dug deeper and deeper, the more we realized that it's anything but. Then I read the following from C. Clifton Black, who happens to be the professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. "*I hear groans from preachers reading this Sunday's Gospel. It contains most things that drive the conscientious into a slough of despondence: exorcisms (verse 38); multiple disturbances in the Greek text, footnoted in responsible English translations (verses 42, 44, 45, 46, 49); hard sayings of Jesus (verses 39-41) that are logically incoherent (verses 48-50) or manifestly outrageous (verses 42-47). No Working Preacher essay can disentangle all these knots.*"¹ Well... that's not encouraging...

So, let's see what we can do to unpack it all. The first thing to know is that we're dealing with what are clearly bits and pieces of the different teachings that Jesus delivered during his ministry. Remember, Jesus dies around the year 35 C.E., and we don't get Mark, which is our first Gospel, until around the year 70. That gives people 35ish years to forget the exact time and order in which Jesus said what he said. Because of this, our section of the text is unified by the themes that it uses. One scholar writes that "*this block of teaching is structured by means of a series of keywords: name, scandal, fire, and salt.*"² Rather than go verse-by-verse, which is

¹<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50>

²Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 290.

what I most often do, we'll instead ride the wave of those keywords and see where it takes us.

The first keyword is name. Specifically the name of Jesus. We are told that the disciples have tried to stop a local exorcist from doing work in Jesus' name. Jesus responds in a fashion very similar to that of Moses in our first reading who said *"Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"*³ Jesus isn't worked up like the disciples over the person performing exorcisms, and responds by telling them to leave the person alone.

But in order to fully understand what's going on, we need to backtrack just a short bit. Our story today follows directly from last week's lesson and the story as a whole is connected. In Mark 9:17, we find out that a small boy is brought before Jesus who is apparently stricken with a demon. The disciples are unable to cast it out of the child, and so they bring him to Jesus. So the disciples fail to perform an exorcism, and shortly after hear the second of Jesus' passion predictions. They misunderstand what Jesus tells them and get into an argument with each other about who is the greatest. Jesus tells them that they're idiots (my translation) and as I said last week, brings before them a social non-entity to convey to them that greatness in God's Kingdom is measured a little differently. After all of this, they hear about some no-name healer who is apparently casting out demons in Jesus' name! The very thing they were unable to do on their own! So they get jealous and try to stop the person. But as one scholar points out, *"the problem as presented here is not that the man was not following Jesus, but that he was not following the Twelve. ('us,' the*

³ Numbers 11:29b

established leadership of the church).”⁴ Another scholar wrote in the commentary for last week's text words that I think are especially applicable. *“After the disciples’ failure to exorcise the demon and the subsequent revelation that they do not know how to pray, this episode shows their incredible lack of perception.”*⁵ As is common in the Gospel of Mark, it’s not their best work.

Which brings us to our next keyword, stumbling blocks. What we read as “stumbling blocks” in our translation would more accurately be scandals in the original Greek. There, the word *skandalizein* is used.⁶ I think scandal can help us see the text in a new way. If you’re anything like me, you become so used to hearing a biblical story that the message can seem pedestrian and bland. Take another look and Jesus is making some very scandalous teachings! Jesus makes a comparison with throwing someone in the sea to drown, and cutting off limbs and body parts if they prove to be a problem! But, *“cut it off” is a command to be taken not literally, but seriously.*⁷ Jesus wants to make it abundantly clear how important this is for believers.

Fire is next, and with it hell. What we translate as “hell” is actually a real location outside of Jerusalem, Gehenna. One scholar points out that Gehenna was the presumed location of what was once a place where child sacrifices were said to have taken place. Over time, Gehenna became a

⁴ Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009. p. 171.

⁵ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 481.

⁶ Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 287.

⁷ Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009. p. 172.

stand in for the word hell.⁸ I have also been told that it eventually became the city dump. The difference is that in the first century city dumps were places that were full of wild animals and where they burned the trash. When you hear scripture talk about the weeping and gnashing of teeth in fire, it was the city dump where the smoke from the fires burned your eyes and the wild animals were a real threat. If you're a Pittsburgh Steeler fan like me, it reminds you of Cleveland.

Our final keyword brings us back to where we started: salt. In our modern society we have a myriad of options when it comes to keeping food preserved, but for most of human existence it's fallen on the shoulders of the cold and salt to do that task. We forget how critical salt was to the lives of those in the ancient world. But, as I found out all those years ago, salt can be dangerous too. Or worse, salt that has sat around for too long can no longer do its job. And so Jesus calls on the disciples and us to be like salt. One scholar hits the nail on the head, writing that *"the hardships that disciples undergo now are disciplines like the fire of a sacrificial offering that purifies, or like salt which stings and smarts but is a preservative in its effect."*⁹

We, like the disciples, face that same challenge. Too much and we try to take control, we overwhelm in ways that make it all about us, rather than keeping things fresh and new. Too little and we fail to do the job that God has called on us to perform. In the end, this passage will continue to challenge and stretch our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. But that's ok. Because you know what gives me hope? The

⁸ Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 287.

⁹ Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009. p. 172.

text makes it clear that the disciples got it wrong time and time again. But God never gave up on them, and God won't give up on us. Look at what the disciples were able to do! Now just imagine where God might be taking you too! Amen.