

“Disturbing Words”

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me ...”

- *“I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”*
- *“It’s raining cats and dogs.”*
- *“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times.”*

English is a very strange and difficult language – not only because there are so many exceptions to the rules that don’t exist in other languages, but that it’s filled with strange phrases and expressions that native speakers understand but can be very confusing to someone who is learning the language. We know that “raining cats and dogs” means that it’s raining heavily – but to someone who is not aware of this hidden meaning they may be looking up at the sky expecting household pets to come pouring down on them. A person may be very hungry, but I’ve never seen anyone eat an entire horse; nor do I remember repeated the same sentence to a person a thousand times. These and so many other idioms in our language are examples of *hyperbole*, “*exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.*” Hyperbole exists in in many languages, and unless you understand its true meaning it can lead to great confusion and even bad decisions – such a taking Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel lesson literally and cutting off one’s hands, or foot, or eye.

Our Gospel lesson from Mark is a section of this Gospels’ most concentrated cluster of moral teachings: vignettes of discipleship within the believing community, the family, and the larger social sphere. The radical nature of discipleship is its focus, consistent with last Sunday’s mandate that each of Jesus’ followers become “*last of all and servant of all*” (9:35). It begins with John informing Jesus that “*we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*” (9:38). The issue of unauthorized prophets occurs in today’s first lesson from Numbers, where Joshua encourages Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp, apparently because they had not been authorized to do so. But Moses’ reaction is not to restrain them from their work: “*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!*” (Numbers 11:29). John takes the role of Joshua in this

episode; he comes to Jesus hoping to be praised for attempting to stop an unnamed outsider from using Jesus' name to exorcise demons. The use of the "name of Jesus" played an important role in the early church; an example of this use of the name of Jesus is seen in our second lesson from the letter of James:

- "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of Jesus. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." – James 5:13-16.

But rather than agree with John's actions or praise him from attempting to prevent an unauthorized disciple from acting in Jesus' name, our Lord takes the view that anyone who is able to exorcise demons in his name should be free to do so: "*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. Whoever is not against us is for us.*" (9:39-40). Unlike the scribes, who accused Jesus of being possessed ("*And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'*" – 3:22), this exorcist will not speak badly of Jesus. Jesus introduces a proverb to demonstrate the truth of this situation ("*Whoever is not against us is for us*") and reminds the disciples of the conditions of their work, in which they are to depend on those among whom they work, trusting them to provide the basic necessities of life: "*For 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 their reward.*" (9:41).

- "The giving and receiving which characterizes disciples is not to be limited to some in-group, but should be common to all who bear the name of Jesus Christ." – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Jesus suddenly shifts gears as he begins a teaching that is among the most disturbing and misunderstood in the gospels. He contrasts the nurturance of Christian believers by some with the infliction of injuries that cause others to lose their faithful footing: "*If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me ...*" (9:42). The "little ones who believe in me" points back to the "little children" received in Jesus' name (9:37), and those given a cup of water because they bear the name of Christ (9:41). Jesus sharply denounces those who put a "stumbling block"

before other believers; the primary meaning of the Greek word *skandalon* is a trap for catching a live animal (“... *know assuredly that the LORD your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns on your eyes, until you perish from this good land that the LORD your God has given you.*” – Joshua 23:13). As it is true that “*whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling*” (1 John 2:10), those who do not act in love for their fellow believers can cause them to lose their faith invites punishment worse than being hurled into the sea with a “*great millstone hung around your neck.*”

This leads into one of the most notorious and disturbing of Jesus’ teachings, his command that “*if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off ... if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off ... if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out*” (9:43-47). Many of Jesus’ sayings and parables employ striking metaphors to drive home their point. The idea that it is better to sacrifice a body part than to allow a person to fall into sin was proverbial in Jesus’ time:

- “Cast away every part of the body which leads you to intemperance; for it is better to live temperately without it, than to live whole.” – Sextus.

Jesus is engaging in hyperbole, language that would have been understood by his original audience as we understand the meaning behind “*it’s raining cats and dogs.*” Because Jesus “*did not speak to them except in parables*” (4:33), he is not literally advocating self-mutilation in these verses. But his audience would have recognized the seriousness of this teaching, that these stark and disturbing remarks are “*intended to grab us by the scruff of the neck and shake us to our senses of the grim consequences that disciples invite when they abuse one another or anyone else.*” (C. Clifton Black). “Cut if off” is a command that is not to be taken literally, but seriously; “*the surpassing value of entering the kingdom of God makes every other good expendable.*” (Williamson). The alternative of such “amputation” is hell, “*where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched*” (9:48). The word “hell” is based on *Gehenna*, a ravine south of Jerusalem notorious for pagan infanticide (“*the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel*” – 2 Chronicles 28:3), envisioned by later Jews as images for the destruction of evil (“*But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.*” – Luke 12:5). Undying worm and unquenched fire were stock images for the destruction of evil (“*And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence*

to all flesh.” – Isaiah 66:24). “Fire and worms” were common descriptions of the punishment awaiting the wicked (*“Humble yourself to the utmost, for the punishment of the ungodly is fire and worms.”* – Sirach 7:17).

- “These sayings challenge us to examine the quality of our discipleship. Is following Christ at the core of our being, something too precious to surrender lightly? Or is our Christianity merely a matter of taste and convenience, something we shelve at the slightest difficulty or inconvenience? Belief that is easily set aside cannot be the faith that Jesus calls for among his disciples.” – PHEME PERKINS.

Jesus concludes this section by stating that *“everyone will be salted with fire.”* (9:49). This may be another proverbial saying, teaching that none of Jesus’ disciples can escape the fiery ordeal that waits all who follow Jesus in the way of the Cross:

- “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” – 1 Peter 4:12-13.

No one can escape such an ordeal, but such trials are the necessary “salt” that preserves the integrity of faith. The psalms speak of God refining persons to demonstrate their integrity (*“Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind.”* – Psalm 26:2); the process of refining also purifies the people (*“Some of the wise shall fall, so that they may be refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end, for there is still an interval until the time appointed.”* – Daniel 11:35). Jesus warns his disciples of the coming persecution in which all of them will be tested as our Lord was tested in his wilderness temptation:

- “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against their parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” – Mark 13:9-13.

A second proverbial saying about salt refers to the worthlessness of salt that has lost its ability to season and preserve: *“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.”* (9:50). Pure salt was a valuable commodity, essential for preservation at a time when there was no refrigeration or other means of preserving food. Salt also played an important role in the worship life of Israel; it was required as a part of the sacrificial offering (*“You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.”* – Leviticus 2:13). Eating salt with someone was a sign of friendship and loyalty (*“Now because we share the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonour, therefore we send and inform the king ...”* – Ezra 4:14). In his teaching in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus proclaims to his followers that *“you are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot”* (Matthew 5:13).

- “Jesus summons his disciples to be what God’s people were always meant to be: salt of the earth and light of the world. Salt was used to flavor and preserve food. Through living the beatitudes, Jesus’ disciples become salt of the earth, preserving goodness in the world. The disciple who does not embody the beatitudes is like salt that loses its taste: he becomes ‘no longer good for anything’ ... Jesus calls his disciples to fulfill this role by living the beatitudes in such a way that the world ‘may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.’” – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

Jesus warns his disciples that those whose lives are not characterized by lowly service nor by openness to Christians who are different nor by care for those who are young in the faith nor by rigorous discipline are like flavourless salt. They have lost the sharpness that sets them apart from their environment and which constitutes their usefulness. Disciples, therefore, are to be “salty Christians” in the sense in which Jesus was when he fulfilled his prediction that *“the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”* (9:31). The true disciples of Christ are to *“have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another”* – to stop squabbling about who is greatest and live as the authentic followers of the one who is the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

- “The final saying, suggesting hospitality and communal solidarity, reminds Christians that they have obligations to one another as well. We should not wait for a time of personal crisis to look for support from others. Neither should we assume that the way we live our lives is merely a private matter.

Everyone around us is either better off or worse off than we are, depending on the kind of ‘salt’ found among Christians and their community.” – Perkins.

While we need to understand the language that Jesus is using in today’s lesson, that his language is to be taken as hyperbole and not literally, that should in no way diminish the seriousness of Jesus’ message to those who are called to be his disciples and sent forth to proclaim the good news to all people. While Jesus is not advocating the amputation of bodily parts, he is using “*shock treatment to jolt his followers out of smug self-complacency or shameless indecency.*” (Black). Jesus speaks so harshly against those who would “*put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me*” (9:42) because our Lord was serious about injustice. The words of the Old Testament prophets called upon the people of Israel to repent of their sins of oppression and injustice and live in obedience to the Lord’s teachings about how they were to live as God’s holy people:

- “Ah, you that turn justice into wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! ... I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” – Amos 5:7, 21-24.
- “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” – Micah 6:8.
- “If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, ‘As the LORD lives!’ in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast.” – Jeremiah 4:1-2.

Jesus has taught his followers that “*from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded*” (Luke 12:48). As the Church of Jesus Christ, we have been entrusted with the most precious gift of all: sharing the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord with all people. We are baptized into the Church which is the body of Christ, called to embody Christ’s self-giving love in all our thoughts, words, and deeds. This is both a great privilege and a serious responsibility, and we must never misuse the power entrusted to us “*to diminish the lives of the least and the lowest in society, instead of helping them to thrive. In the eyes of the biblical prophets, this*

was the true sin that plagued God's people, and I think it still plagues many who claim to follow Christ today." (Alan Brehm).

We cannot dismiss or diminish the shocking and disturbing nature of Jesus' words. They call us to take a hard look at ourselves and repent of the ways in which we may have diminished others, causing them to question their faith and God's love for them. We confess our sins knowing that God is "*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*" (Joel 2:13), but in that pronouncement of forgiveness is also the call to recognize that this is the "*time for amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of his Holy Spirit*" (*Service Book and Hymnal*).

- "Are we supporting the little ones who believe in Jesus as they totter, or strewing rocks and fences and walls that break them down? Jesus' family is expansive; the church faces a reckoning. If a bacterial soul isn't disinfected now, its treatment later will be a helluva lot worse." – Black.

Jesus may not be telling us to literally "cut if off," but he is commanding us to "cut it out" – to cut out any behaviour that diminishes the faith of others so that we might truly be the salt of the earth, "*seasoned and sprinkled by God, so that we may be both acceptable sacrifices unto him, and also so that in our being knit together we may season one another.*" (John Calvin). May it be our fervent prayer that our Lord will "*keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me; then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent of a great offense*" so that in all that we do as God's "salty people" we live faithfully so that "*the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.*" (Psalm 19:13-14).

- "Faithful God, you sent your incarnate Word as the sun of justice to shine upon all the world. Open our eyes to see your gracious hand in all our works, that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness, for the sake of him through whom all things were made, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen."