

"Enemies and Friends"
 James 5:13 ó 20 Mark 9:38 ó 50
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 September 27, 2009

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, once commented that people should not become Christians in order to feel better. He believed that while Christianity was important, perhaps even essential, the appropriate motivation for becoming a Christian was not to be more comfortable. He said that being a finite human in relationship to an infinite God could only be a disturbing experience. The Gospel of Mark supports his contention even more than the other three Gospels. Our Gospel reading today seems to be full of threats and impossible requirements for faithfulness. How are we to understand such passages?

Most of time when I look at the Lectionary passages for the week, I feel hopeful and energized because I know I have something important to say given the context of the reading. Occasionally however, I come across a passage that I just want to run away from. I must confess that this is one of those sermons. Of course, I really can't run away. It is my responsibility to find something at least useful, if not enlightening, to say to you. So, here goes.

It is important for us to understand both what Jesus is up to in his preaching and ministry, and what Mark is up to in the way he tells the story. It appears that both Jesus and Mark want to shake us up. They want us to see beyond our presuppositions and prejudices in order for us, as individuals and as communities, to be open to the saving love of God. We human beings seem to have a desire to make simplistic sense of our surroundings. For starters, we want the Good People to wear white hats and the bad people to wear black hats. We want to be able to determine without difficulty whom we can trust and whom we can ignore. We also seem to want to be in control. The disciples are wonderfully clear examples of all these tendencies.

In today's reading, the disciples come across a person who is doing good work, casting out demons in Jesus' name, but without being directly part of their group. As so often is the case, the disciples get confused, thinking that no one can truly be a friend of theirs without being directly under Jesus' supervision. I suspect, given the nature of their arguments with each other, that they also are afraid that someone else might become more important than they are. To be chosen by Jesus makes them, in their own estimation, more important than other people. They don't want anyone messing up their position. Jesus makes it clear that his influence and the influence of the God they all worship does not, cannot, and need not come under their control.

If the disciples, and we, are not already sufficiently offended by Jesus' challenges to us about our judgments, there is more to come. Next, he calls upon them to remove the offending parts of their bodies in order to be able to enter into life. On the surface, these words sound like dire threats, the kind of threats we try not to spread around in our own liberal practice of the faith, and the kind that are designed to keep us focused on obeying the rules. As horrifying as it is to read these words, that dire interpretation is only supported by a superficial reading. What we can see clearly is that Jesus moves the focus of the discussion away from the disciples's concern for the unknown other, possibly evil, people, and puts it squarely on their own shoulders, and ours. That means for us, that whenever we try to locate evil outside of ourselves, we must be brought

back to the one place where we actually have some influence: within ourselves. If we read this passage like a religious fundamentalist might, our attention will immediately go to the threat of hell as a punishment for our sin. This one factor makes it difficult to appreciate this passage in a more profound and useful way.

I am not about to launch into a speculation about whether or not Hell exists. All we need to do is pick up a newspaper, listen to the radio, or watch the news on television in order to see that there's plenty of hell right before our eyes. Furthermore, to the degree that we worry about our fate as individuals, our experience of hell increases. It is only when we begin thinking more broadly about relationship and community that we can find some comfort and that we can develop some understanding of this difficult passage of Scripture. Our greatest hell on Earth has to do with being isolated, judged, and removed from the fellowship of the community. Religious institutions are always tempted to draw a clear line between those who belong and those who are on the outside. It is that very kind of judgment that Jesus challenges over and over again. The example Jesus gives of faithful living is the simple offer of a cup of water. I suppose it is a kind of hospitality. It is an act of intimacy and respect that recognizes the needs of the other and intends to demonstrate compassion. To give a cup of water in the name of Jesus means to recognize the divine nature in the person you are serving.

While this is a passage about the temptation to sin, it is not about moralistic transgressions. Jesus is talking about the kind of sin that "Places stumbling blocks before one of these little ones who believe in [him]". Jesus has just finished talking about the value of receiving the children, so a "Stumbling block" would be any behavior or attitude that keeps someone from full participation in the community. Ironically, when we act in a way that isolates someone else, we also isolate ourselves. Inevitably, the very things we do to others come back to us.

Jesus uses very harsh language to describe these temptations. I wonder why he would need to do that. Perhaps it is because we are so much in love with our intellectual understanding, our sense of moral superiority, our desire to be on the winning team, and our fear of being on the wrong side. It is extraordinarily difficult to set aside our preconceived ideas about ourselves or about other people. We might say that our prejudices become a part of us; so to set them aside is about as easy as cutting off a hand or a foot, or plucking out an eye.

I know that when I read this passage, I am tempted to see a picture of having to deform myself in order to belong to the community of faith. The irony of this picture is that the prejudices themselves are responsible for most of our deformations, and, ironically, it is their removal that makes us whole. The last part of this passage contains a cryptic reference to our saltiness. Jesus says, "For everyone will be salted with fire". What, on earth, does that mean? Perhaps it means that real life experience burns away our selfish ideas about how we want life to be. In our culture, our fantasies of fortune or power are inextricably tied to the misfortunes of others. In order for us to be acknowledged as being better, others must be judged as being worse. In order for us to have more, others must have less. In order for us to feel comfortable, we must have others to serve us. Once again, Jesus turns our selfish ideas upside down. The very things we desire: those things that promise to make us happy, tend to isolate us in the long run, and leave us in our own cold hell.

The challenge of this sermon is to determine what it would look like if we actually did remove our prejudices and our selfish fantasies and to think how we might do it. We would have to determine as individuals and as a church what the barriers are to our growing in the faith and to our growth and development as the embodiment of the spirit of Christ. We probably would have to give up the idea that we are absolutely right about so many things. We'd have to revise our predetermined ideas about who the good people and who the bad people are in our world. We would have to resist the all too prevalent human tendency to brand individuals or even whole peoples as being "Evil". We would have to look very carefully at any aspects of our individuality or of our community that might stand as a stumbling block, that is to say, as a barrier to anyone who would participate in the kind of gathered community that Jesus envisioned and promoted.

Not to do these things leaves us to die in isolation. It's quite clear to me in my time with you that you, as a church, do not want that outcome. We are charged to recognize that we possess ample "Saltiness". That saltiness has developed out of the rich experiences of our lives and it is one of our most terrific qualities. We cannot afford to lose our saltiness, no matter what else happens. To reiterate, it is our prejudices and stumbling blocks to faith that stand in way of our full participation in life and in the body of Christ. Not only do our prejudices and stumbling blocks to keep us isolated from God but they served to isolate others as well.

I pray that we will be able to see clearly, beyond our prejudices. I pray, in the Spirit of Jesus' gospel challenges that we will be able to recognize the friend that may look like an enemy, and to be wary of the enemy that masquerades as a friend. As hard as the challenges of Jesus are to hear and do, it is clear that they are given in love and that Jesus wants the best for us. When we act on this kind of faith, we participate in the Body of Christ. And that is very good news indeed.