

Sermon 9-27-09¹
Galatians 5:16-26
Mark 9:38-50
Hard Words for the Long Haul

For those who formulate in their minds eye a gentle and docile vision of Jesus – a meek and mild vision of Jesus who acts tenderly with children, never utters a harsh word or a stern warning, who cheers us on when we’ve hit a rough patch in life, and never really asks too much of his disciples – if this is the vision you’ve formulated then I’m happy to say that Jesus himself shatters this pipe dream. In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus is unabashedly forthcoming with his disciples concerning what’s expected of them; continually filling out what picking up our crosses, denying ourselves, and following Jesus is all about in the life of discipleship.

Now the wild ride starts when Jesus tells his disciples that if anyone gets in the way of someone else’s discipleship, causing them to sin, then it would be better if they were dropped in the middle of a lake with a heavy stone around their neck. From there Jesus’ language gets a bit more bizarre and a bit harsher. On the surface, Jesus essentially tells his disciples that if their hand, foot, or eye causes them to sin, causes them to act in a manner inconsistent with their call as disciples, then they should remove the appendage rather than be cast into the perpetually burning fires of Gehenna (what is often translated as hell within most translations). Jesus seemingly advocates that his disciples would be better off going through life maimed than be cast into the ever-burning garbage heap southwest of Jerusalem. One might wonder what is with the harsh words. Is Jesus really calling for the self-mutilation of his disciples if a part of their body causes them to sin, or is something else

¹ Sermon preached by the Rev. Tom Moore on Sunday, September 27, 2009 at Emsworth UP Church.

going on here beneath the surface? What would cause Jesus to speak in such a harsh and seemingly brash tone with those whom he has called to follow him and with those whom he supposedly cares for?

Cut off your hand, cut off your foot, pluck out your eye if any of these causes you to sin: if nothing else in the course of this passage, the jarring language Jesus uses seeks to call his disciples to attention; calling them to stop looking at things from their petty point of view and focus on the larger picture what God is doing in and through Jesus' life and ministry. Imagine if you will that you are one of the disciples, put yourself in their shoes. You've been walking with Jesus for some time; you've witnessed the stilling of the sea of Galilee, the legion of demons coming forth from a man into a herd of pigs, you've seen the way people flock to him, you've heard his words about the cost of discipleship and what he has to say about the suffering that the messiah will go through. You were caught arguing about which of you is the greatest and Jesus told you that real greatness comes from being least of all and servant of all. And just after he finishes telling you this, just after, John goes and opens up his big mouth about someone else, who isn't a part of your tight-knit group, doing a powerful deed in the name of Jesus. And you look at Jesus' face – you've seen that look before. It's the same look when Jesus rebukes a demon, the same look when Jesus rebuked the sea; it's the same look when Jesus rebuked Peter and now you know you're going to get it.

In response to his disciples thick-headedness, Jesus calls them to attention with his arresting statement; he snaps their minds out of their dreamy fantasies so that they'll focus in on the reality of what God is doing in the world. He spent all this time leading them and teaching them, he just proclaimed that they must be least of all and servants of all, and the

disciples turn around and begin acting like the elitist Pharisees and scribes in expressing their concern about a person casting out demons in Jesus' name. Rather than showing their servant hearts they showed their selfish and self-interested ways of thinking. And so, Jesus speaks harshly, reminding them who they are dealing with and more importantly getting them to be attentive to the ways they conduct themselves in the world. Yet, he doesn't do this simply for the sake of being harsh; rather he does it out of the freedom of his love and his concern that his disciples, those whom he has called, will flourish in their calling.

In many ways, the disciples needed a wake-up call. And we can see ourselves in their position as well. How often do we go through life, acting out of our own self-interests and desires? How often do we get caught up in the flow of things; caught up in our jobs, caught up in our hobbies, caught up in behaviors and actions that might not be the best thing for us, caught up in a TV show, or even in our the good intentions of our discipleship? The great example we have in the disciples is a reminder that we're human, we're finite, we're not God. We can get easily distracted by what we're doing or the things going in our lives, so much so that we cease to be self-aware; we become inattentive to how our actions affect others and even how they affect us in our walk with Jesus. Like the disciples, we can get so caught up in what we're doing, even knowing the glory of the gospel, that we still miss the boat. With John we get concerned about the things someone else is doing because they aren't a part of our church or they aren't a part of circles of fellowship we move within. And from time to time we need to be snapped out of our dreamy-eyed reveries, our distractions, and our self-interested desires. We need to be continually confronted by the Lord our God out of the freedom of his love and power to see in the midst of his holy love and mercy the

depths of our short-comings and sin so that we are reminded that apart from Him, we can do nothing.

We don't see people walking around with one hand, one foot, or one eye because that's not what Jesus is really calling for. Using a bit of hyperbole and over-exaggeration, Jesus' words catch our attention, drive us to our knees, and reminds us who we are dealing with and who we are called to be. Cause lets be honest with ourselves, you spend time with someone or get used to a certain place, and you begin to take things for granted. We can forget that Jesus isn't some old dead guy who lived and taught 2,000 years ago; he isn't some moral exemplar that we can follow when we feel like it. Moreover the Church isn't some country club you pay your dues to get into and discipleship is a whole lot more than showing up on a Sunday morning. Life with God isn't hanging out with some great benevolent grandfather who pats us on the head, spoils us with candy, and then hands us back over to our parents.

No, Jesus' arresting and confronting words drive us to our knees in prayer and humility as we are reminded that when we deal with Jesus we are dealing with the Lord our God. There's no god behind the back of Jesus who's out to get us and there sure isn't any god who sits there with arms folded, cheering us on while hoping that we get things right in the end. Staring into the face of Jesus we are staring into the face of the Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth; who, out of the freedom of his love and power, penetrated into the depths of our sin-sick and desperate situations in, through, and as the man Jesus to heal the pain of sin from within our humanity, to enliven our lives by his life, and who went to the cross and was resurrected for us and our salvation. Jesus' arresting and confronting words to us, his call that what causes us to sin should be removed, are

God's NO! against all our vain attempts to live on our own; God's NO! against the ways that we try to be like God or live separate from him. For the reality is that Jesus himself has laid hold of us in those blessed waters of baptism, bound us in union with his life through the power of the Holy Spirit, and in him we have been crucified along with all our passions and desires so that we might live by his power, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, and guided in each of our steps.

Our living, reigning, active, and present Lord calls us out from beyond ourselves, beyond our self-interested or lackadaisical ways, to a life of attentiveness and fulfillment. Jesus offers some hard words for the long haul to remind us that we have nothing apart from him and warning us to be attentive to the ways we act in the world. For we aren't called to a way of life that involves fornication, impurity, idolatry, or jealousy and anger, as the Apostle Paul suggests. We aren't called to be stumbling blocks for others, getting in the way of their discipleship by leading them to sin. Rather, we are called to be attentive, to remember who our Lord and Savior is, that he has really and truly laid hold of us and bound us in union with his crucified, risen, and reigning life so that we might be living witnesses to his glory and wonder and love. Filled and guided by the Holy Spirit we might be about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It's because of who Jesus is that we are called to a particular life of discipleship; one that reflects the total claim he places upon our lives, not only on Sunday but all the way through to Saturday, and bears witness to his life-changing power to all whom we meet. In Jesus' arresting words, we are reminded of all God has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for the glory of his name. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.