

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

September 26, 2021

Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

Mark 8:38-50

. . . It is better to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, . . .

(Mark 8:43 N.R.S.V.)

To Hell and Back

A few years ago at a Mensa convention, a group was having lunch together at a restaurant. In order to be a member of Mensa, you have to have an IQ of more than 140. So this group of brilliant people were eating together when one of them noticed that the salt shaker had pepper in it and the pepper shaker contained salt.

The group started talking about how they could best transfer the contents of each shaker into its proper container without spilling any of the pepper or salt. Finally after much discussion they came up with a brilliant plan involving a straw, a napkin, and an empty saucer. So they called their waitress over. They were sure she was going to be so impressed with their incredible solution.

They got no further than pointing out that the pepper was in the salt shaker and the salt in the pepper shaker when the waitress picked up both shakers, switched the lids on the shakers and put them back on the table. “And does anyone have room for dessert?” she asked.

Sometimes we simply over think things and it’s not that complicated.

Jesus often told parables to illustrate a point. And sometimes he did not bother to explain his point further, but just left his hearers to figure it out. That is not the case of our passage from Mark for today. Jesus speaks bluntly.

He warns us that it is better to go into the kingdom of God maimed than to end up in hell with a whole body. Yes, Jesus is using exaggeration to make a point and I will get to that. But his main point is clear. We need to be very careful with our choices and decision because living in the kingdom of God is the most important thing. It trumps all other concerns. Or at least it should.

We can allow our lives to get so busy, so overwhelmed, and so complicated that we lose sight of why God put us here on earth. It isn’t complicated at all. God put us here on earth to love God and each other. God put us here on earth for kingdom living. Nothing else will do.

So let's break it down a little bit. Let me note that Jesus does not speak of hell often. Here he does speak of hell, but it is not the place of eternal punishment that we often picture. His use of hell here is that of a garbage dump, a place where things which are beyond repair or otherwise worthless are tossed and left to rot.

The Greek word that Jesus uses here for hell is "Gehenna." It was the name of the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. There was a valley there named the valley of Ben Hinnom. It was there that the rebellious Israelites once offered child sacrifices to the pagan gods of Molech and Baal. In 2 Kings 23:10, King Josiah forever condemned this valley as an unholy place. So in time the people of Jerusalem began to use it as a garbage pit. They burned their trash there and the fire never really went out but smoldered and poured black smoke into the air both day and night.

Part of the point here is that no human being deserves to end up on the trash heap. We are each of us made in the image of God. God regards each of us as precious beyond price. We are each given gifts and opportunities to love and work in the kingdom of God here on earth. Yet, time and again people feel like they have been judged as worthless and kicked to the curb. How did we get there?

Jesus wants us to consider the importance of the decisions we make and how we live our lives. We were created to live as children of God, and not to lose or destroy ourselves in worldly addictions. So Jesus says, "It is better to enter into the kingdom living maimed than to find ourselves on the trash heap with a whole body."

There have been some unfortunate people, usually with mental problems, who have taken this verse to mean that they should literally cut off parts of their body. The Jews had a horror of such things and would never have understood this as a literal command.

We use exaggeration all of the time to make a point. If I said to you that on my drive home last night I was scared half to death twice, you would understand that I had two scary experiences on the way home. You would not be saying to yourself, if he was scared half to death twice, and two halves make a whole, then he is saying that he is dead. But funny he doesn't look dead.

Okay, well Chuck or Steve might be saying that to themselves, but they would be just kidding around.

What Jesus is saying is that there are some things in our lives that are keeping us from serving God. There are some things in our lives that are destroying us. Yet, those things can become so dear to us that we think we can't give them. Giving them up feels like losing a part of our very selves, or a piece of our physical bodies.

I was reading about one man who grew up in a family that had wine with all their special meals. In this man's mind, the wine was associated with Christmas and Thanksgiving Dinners, with birthday and wedding anniversaries. The taste of wine brought back all the warm feelings and memories of happy family times.

From time to time this individual enjoyed what he called a “social drink” at parties. But by mid-life he discovered that he was developing addictive habits, showing some of the early warning signals for alcoholism. It must have felt like cutting off his hand, but this man decided that his best choice was not to drink at all. And he has stuck to that decision for many years now. He discarded this aspect of his life completely rather than let it destroy his whole self.

That is the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about.

I might point out that when we talk of addictions, we our minds usually go to alcoholism or drug abuse, or maybe smoking cigarettes, or gambling. But we can be addicted to lots of otherwise good things. We can be addicted to work, addicted to sex, addicted to sports.

If there is a part of our life that is pulling us away from God, then we need to turn loose of that aspect of our lives. And here is the thing, I want to emphasize for you. We are not doing this alone. We have help. Christ has promised to help us. And we as Christians have also promised to help others.

When Jesus was crucified on the cross, he was looking out across the Gehenna - the garbage dump. We say in the words of the Apostle’s Creed that Christ descended into hell, the third day he rose again and ascended into heaven. . .

When we say that in the Apostle’s Creed, we are talking about Christ going into hell to preach to those who had died before him and to free those who were imprisoned there. However, there is also a literal sense in which Jesus was thrown out on the trash heap when he was crucified outside of town. He went to hell and back to save us.

Someone once commented that the best place to look for Jesus is in hell. Because he comes to us in the hells that we have made for ourselves. Time and again he goes to hell and back to save us.

So if you are feeling kicked to the curb this morning, if you are feeling worthless, if you are feeling like you are stuck in hell - there is hope for you. Jesus Christ will go to hell and back to save you. There is a way out.

It is our job as a church to help you make the choices in life that lead to the kingdom. It is also our job to help you keep the faith. We can’t make anyone’s choices for them. But we can offer a hand up, we can offer hope, we can stand by those who need us.

I was reading about a young man who was born into a very bad part of town. He was raised in a cycle of violence and abuse. Yet he managed to escape that vicious cycle and to become a successful and well-respected adult. When asked how he had managed to do that, he replied, “There was this one coach and he believed in me.”

That is our calling as a church. We are to see people with God’s eyes. We are to see the precious treasure that each person is to God. We are to support and uplift and to believe in each other. Our eyes will never look upon a person that God does not love. And even if we are having trouble believing in a particular person, let us at the very least believe that Christ himself

is still at work in that person's life. Because he is. That is reason enough to keep working and to keep loving.

Jesus ends this section by talking about how each of us is salt. And then there is that somewhat confusing line about "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be a peace with one another."

Scientists point out that salt - sodium chloride - does not degrade into anything else. However, salt can be so contaminated with dust and dirt as to be useless in seasoning food. To have salt in ourselves is to make space in our lives for God alone. We are not to allow our lives to become so diluted with the demands of the world that we lose the ability to channel the love of God.

It is all about the choices we make. Joshua stood before the Israelites as they were about to enter the promised land and said, "Choose this day whom you will serve. Choose . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15)

Amen.