

Proper 21 B 2021  
Mark 9: 38-50

If our lives as Christians are about paradox, about the opportunity to see the abundance of God's love in what often feels like a zero-sum world, it is that dissonance, hope in the midst of our deafening silence of the anonymous poor, that is at the center of what we are about today. It has only been a week since we heard about the little ones, the kind we see in Sunday School rooms climbing all over Jesus, the nameless people on our streets, and today we get to hear the price of getting in the way of them. With his eyes fixed on Jerusalem and all the wreckage we will see during his final week there, he tells his disciples the exact price of what happens when we restrain the little ones among us, whether they hang out at the local playground or are trying to scrape enough to hold their family together. For those who would stand in their way, "it would be better if a great millstone were hung around your neck"; for those who stumble, it would be better to lose an eye or a foot, "rather than be thrown into hell, where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched".

If we are already squirming in our seats, we should be; these are no one's favorite verses in the Bible. But Jesus is talking about our wholeness much more than our eyes or limbs. Put this way, his words sound like a threat, even if we hear them with a little exaggeration. As disciples we do not get time off for good behavior, time to let off a little steam at the expense of those we would ignore or hinder: everyone has value, especially the smallest, whose needs are as real as yours or mine. When we get in their way, we are sacrificing more than our hands and feet. Something changes in our souls, so that we become less than the people we were made to be, people whose lives are worth exactly as much as those we treat so cavalierly, the hungry, the voiceless, even the small child he has placed on his lap. All of us are members of the kingdom of heaven and if we don't give them what they need, we cannot be whole ourselves.

But behind this threat is also a promise. When we see Jesus looking squarely at his disciples, telling them what they can expect if they do not look after the needs of the little ones, he is also telling them that what they have to offer matters, that they have power to change people's lives, if only they will take this call seriously. Wholeness begins in the effort to take our souls as seriously as we do our beautiful eyes or lovely limbs; it is a wake-up call as much as a threat. We have a duty to each other and much more than our physical selves are at stake.

If we have trouble calling up our own stumbling blocks, we can begin with the ways that we treat one another, calling each other God's children and then treating each other like stepchildren or worse. Taking stock of our gifts from God and then hoarding them, refusing to share our selves and what we have with others. Our own stumbling blocks become those of others and they cripple us and everyone around us. Anthony, the great fourth-century monk who lived the simplest life imaginable, had a great deal to say about the ways that we maim ourselves, how we damage our own souls. "The person who sins against the neighbor does evil to the self; and the person who does good to the neighbor does good to the self...Therefore, while we are still clothed in this heavy body, let us rouse up the image of God in ourselves ...[for] if we do this, we shall be showing God's compassion for us." Wholeness begins when we are able to treat those around us as we do ourselves and offering what we have to ones from whom we could just as easily look aside.

Part of the good news is the understanding that we do not have to confront these challenges alone, that this need for wholeness is something deeply understood by God and it is rooted in our baptisms. The price we pay for ignoring the needs around us is steep, but attending to them is not something we have to do by ourselves. With God's help, we retain our own souls and our sanity to allow the work of God to happen among us by acknowledging that this gift of mutual respect comes through the grace of God; all we need to do is ask for it. It involves recognizing that we are a community, a circle

as wide as we want it to be. The radical hospitality that we extend to others in our hearts and our work in the world completes us in a way that our self-contained lives could not.

One of the wonderful things about being among “little ones,” however we want to envision them, is that they teach us to see in ways we could not without the questions they bring to our lives. I am not just talking about the kids in our lives; I am talking about those who have gone without for so long that they do not even know what enough is. It is the indifference we have as a society to those on the margins, especially those who have suffered most gravely during this last year-and-a-half. If we ignore them and the brokenness in which they spend much of their lives, we are putting our own wholeness at risk. Our complacency is as heavy a millstone as anything we can actively do to others. It cheapens our lives and theirs not to ask, “what are you going through?” and denigrates the wholeness that is part of the dignity we promise to uphold at our baptisms.

The monk Anthony knew a great deal about these stumbling blocks; they informed his life and all his relationships with God and his neighbor. “Our life and death are with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against God.” It is because of this need for wholeness, as people and as workers for the kingdom of heaven, that we cannot diminish others, no matter how insignificant in our lives they may seem. If we take lightly the offerings of others, we are risking the deepest part of ourselves. They are a part of who we are, and if we do not take them seriously, it might be better for us one day to be at the bottom of the sea.

As seriously as Jesus speaks today, I believe it is out of love, love for those who have journeyed with him so far and love for the little ones that surround him. No matter how graphic the language, I do not believe that there are millstones that await us, unless we create them for ourselves, here and now. I think what God wants for us is our two good eyes, all of our limbs to help us be as deeply conscious of the needs of others as we dare, to use them to build a kingdom in which we all can be whole.