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19 Pentecost/Proper 21B: Mark 9:38-50
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I don't know about you, but today's gospel reading is NOT one of my favorites. Instead of Jesus blessing, breaking bread; holding, healing; there is talk of severed hands, amputated feet, gouged out eyes; of plunging into the sea with a millstone around one's neck, of being thrown into hell. What am I supposed to get from this passage? Am I—are WE—supposed to take it literally? No, not literally. But **seriously. Oh so seriously.** (See [1].)

When Jesus talked about maiming the body he was speaking metaphorically; he was speaking in an exaggerated way. He was speaking for emphasis.

When Jesus talked about maiming the body, he was saying: it is really really serious when you undermine the faith of another, whether that other is someone trying to heal people or whether that other is a small child. Getting in the way of someone else's faith is really really serious. And. It is really really serious when you, yourself, dismiss or disregard the reality of God and God's desires for you and your life.

How serious?

Threatening a soul is as bad—is **worse**, actually—than threatening a body. Refusing to acknowledge the presence of God is **worse** than the absence of your hand or foot or eye. God is as intimate a part of you as your own body and throwing God away is as bad—even worse—than cutting off and throwing away a part of your own body.

What if we don't accept this warning?

Jesus says: we are thrown into hell. Where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

The Hebrew word for hell in this passage is Gehenna (geh-HEHN-uh), which was an actual geographical place in the time of Jesus. Gehenna was a garbage dump in a valley outside of Jerusalem. Garbage was thrown in—hence the worms—and bodies were thrown in, and fires burned continuously.

Just as Jesus said in other gospel readings that the kingdom of God is like a vineyard or a field or a marriage feast, he says in this reading that hell is like a garbage dump where life is impossible and fires never stop. This would have been a potent image for the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus would also have known of another Jewish concept of hell—which is called Sheol.

Sheol was thought of as a place under the surface of the earth where **all** went following death. And the essence of Sheol—the essence of this hell—was that all were isolated and alienated from the presence of God. The great pain of hell was isolation from God where even prayer was impossible.

Gehenna, Sheol, hell: the experience of torment, of radical isolation, of separation from God. And a consequence of how we live our lives, or perhaps I should say, how we live our deaths.

In this gospel passage, Jesus is speaking for emphasis; he is trying to get his disciples—us as well as them—to understand that whether or not we follow Jesus and whether or not we encourage others to, is a life-or-death decision. In this gospel passage, Jesus is trying to get his disciples—then and now—to understand that preventing others from moving closer to God, and choosing to live separately from God oneself—is to chose, actually, to die—with broken body and anguished soul. It is this separation from God that is hell. A hell that is as horrible as the image of burning forever in a garbage dump with only worms for constant and everlasting companions; a hell that is as horrible as the image of being totally alone for all eternity, a relationship with God most painfully and irrevocably out of reach.

What is the alternative?

The Episcopal priest and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, puts it in easy-to-understand words:

If we want to be whole, we can use our two good eyes to see the world the way God sees it and we can use our two good feet to carry us into it as deeply as we dare, and we can stretch out our still-attached arms to someone in danger of stumbling, so that God can steady and save us all. (1)

This is what God wants—to steady and save us all. To preserve us, as salt preserves, if only we would open our eyes, hold out our hands, walk in the way of the Lord.

(1) Barbara Brown Taylor. Shock Therapy. In **Bread of Angels**. Boston MA: Cowley, 1997.