

Good Medicine

Mark 9:38-50

September 27, 2009

I.

Two of our readings today seem a little negative, don't they. They probably are not examples we would use if we were trying to explain how reading the Bible can be uplifting and encouraging.

We heard about tension and irritation, condemnation and judgment, and certainly there were dramatic and challenging ideas. The worst aspects of human nature seem to be front and center, and the consequences of separation from God are equally clear.

But as we will see, there also are words of grace. Many biblical passages have difficult messages, and some of Jesus' teachings are no exception. But if we read them closely we also see there is hope. God's grace is not far away. He shows us the path ahead, and calls us to take it.

We started today with Moses, who was being criticized by the Hebrews as he was leading them in the desert on their way from captivity in Egypt to the promised land. And he wondered why God had burdened him with such complainers and whiners.

In the very first line of this Old Testament reading, for example, the Hebrews are described as rabble who grumbled that the manna God had given them to eat was not enough. Then, in a classic display of ingratitude, they spoke fondly of food they ate when they were slaves in Egypt.

Moses also was frustrated. And he basically asked God, "Why must I bear the burdens of these people, did I give birth to them, am I to be their nurse?" And God, in his grace, cleared the way for the appointment of seventy elders to help Moses deal with the dysfunctional group he was leading through the desert. Hold this story in your minds; I will return to it.

And then we come to today's Gospel, which has several parts. And the last part is rather gruesome, at least on the surface. Jesus said that if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off because that is better than going to hell. As if that was not enough, then he said if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, because you are better off with one eye in the kingdom than with two eyes in hell.

This reading begs to be explained, doesn't it? Many of us have heard these words before. Their dramatic nature remains fixed in our memories, and we might wonder what they really mean. We hope there is something helpful beneath what seem to be unrealistic demands.

As we explore today's reading we will see that it does indeed carry a realistic and meaningful Christian message. And in this case, as with all difficult biblical readings, we can encounter two opposite but equal dangers.

One danger is that without understanding Jesus' real meaning, we might simply ignore what he said. If we are uncomfortable with it we push it aside and forget about it. That's a bad practice. We cannot pick and choose from the Bible, and use what we like but disregard what we don't.

The other danger is that we take these words too literally. In doing that we can miss their real meaning. This approach also can spill over into how we read other parts of the Bible, which further distorts God's Word.

II.

So, let's look at this part of today's Gospel. Why did Jesus make demands in such harsh terms? Couldn't he just have told a parable, or said what he wanted to say a little less graphically?

Well, as a way to begin, I can stand here today and tell you that it will not cost you an arm and a leg to get to heaven. And notice that I just used a metaphor about body parts in that last sentence. Jesus used the same kind of metaphorical image when he identified body parts with sin, and then said those body parts, those sins, must be cut away.

And perhaps Jesus used shocking images with the disciples in order to drive his point home. During the journey to Jerusalem that occupies this part of Mark's Gospel, Jesus was proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom. This was no small thing. In fact, the coming of the kingdom was then and remains now the most significant event that could possibly occur in the history of the world.

And Jesus was not talking about changing our lives in minor ways. He did not live among us just to offer a few helpful hints about self-improvement. The kingdom of God is not just a little program to encourage people to be nicer to each other. And you don't create enemies who want to crucify you merely because you are suggesting a little change here, or a little change there.

No, Jesus was talking about a hugely different new world. He was revealing a new reality beyond the comprehension of most people at the time. Perhaps Jesus felt the need to use radical and grisly imagery to get peoples' attention. Perhaps he believed that shocking images were the best way to make his point.

III.

And the point was that the kingdom is for the faithful, and faithful living can be difficult. Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things, and sometimes we can become very attached to those things we are called to give up if we are to lead the lives that Jesus wants for us.

There is no doubt that today's Gospel is about sin, and in some churches it is not fashionable to talk about sin. Some of the more modern translations of this reading do not even talk about sinning, and instead water it down and describe it as stumbling.

But no matter what we call it, the larger point is that real sin comes from the heart and the mind, not from the hands and the feet. Sin, which is separation from God, comes from our attitudes, and our practices, and our habits that we know or suspect are wrong, but that we do anyway. These are the things that today's Gospel calls us to cut out, to get rid of, to remove from ourselves and our lives. Jesus' language is symbolic, but the meaning is real.

IV.

If Jesus were here today perhaps he would use different terminology. In first century Palestine amputation was a common medical treatment for healing. It often was necessary to remove an infected part of the body to save an earthly life just as Jesus was speaking symbolically of doing the same to save our eternal lives.

Today there are other options. Rather than literally cutting something off perhaps Jesus could have referred to more modern techniques. What about righteous radiation to destroy harmful practices, or a blessed bypass to avoid them? While the metaphors would be different, the meaning would be the same. The treatment would be different, but the result would be the same. The condition of sin, if treated successfully, would be gone.

So, what are these conditions we are called to cut out as we seek God's kingdom? Perhaps we can search ourselves and examine what we see. Ask God in prayer to help. Remember the Psalms where David said, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (139:23-24)

And when we look inwardly we might find lingering resentment against someone that the enemy uses to keep us from a full relationship with God. Perhaps there might be unforgiveness, or a judgmental way of viewing others. Perhaps there might be envy, or pride, or an excessive interest in material things that gets in the way of faith or stewardship. And maybe there are temptations we seem unable to resist.

Whatever it might be, these are the things that Jesus calls us to renounce, to remove from ourselves, and to cut out. These things were described as hands, feet, and eyes in this first century Gospel, but they could be anything in today's world. They are different for each of us, and each of us probably has some idea of what they are.

The problem is in doing something about it. Sometimes it can be difficult, especially where addictions are involved. And sometimes we don't succeed when we try, and we have to try again. But today's Gospel calls us to persevere. And if we call upon the Holy Spirit we can be empowered to do what otherwise might seem impossible.

And now, let's see how the Old Testament story relates to the Gospel. By reading further we learn that the Hebrews continued to be contentious and disobedient. Appointment of seventy elders meant little. Almost the entire generation died in the desert and never saw the promised land. The first half of their exodus took about one year. Then they made the golden calf and wandered forty years. They did not do God's will, and experienced the consequences Jesus described today.

V.

I would like to conclude with an example. I once accompanied a friend to an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to offer support. Toward the end of the meeting the leader announced it was time for progress pins to be distributed.

The first pins went to all who had been clean and sober for thirty days. Then came pins for those who had been clean and sober for six months. After that, people who had been clean and sober for one year received their pins. Then, with seriousness and solemnity, he announced it was time for the most important pins of all. He asked anyone to come forward who had been clean and sober for twenty-four hours.

A journey begins with the first step. And today's Gospel tells us that if there are things within us that interfere with having a holy relationship with God, now is the time to start. And the first twenty-four hours could be the hardest.

As I said earlier, today's readings might not be among our favorite Bible passages. They are not the verses we recite with our children as we put them to bed. Even so, God's grace shines through. If we live the faithful lives to which we have been called, our rewards will be eternal and beyond anything we can imagine.

But we are not called to do it alone. The church is here as our companion. Dealing with the temptations and distractions alone can be difficult. Dealing with them together, in the church, with each other, led by the Holy Spirit, is a lot easier.

And we usually cannot transform ourselves overnight. There is unlikely to be a flash bang moment when we suddenly find ourselves free of burdens in our lives. It can be a process, a journey, sometimes with two steps forward and one step back. And that journey is easier if it is shared with others.

Jesus spoke to the disciples as a group, and he speaks to us as a group. Here, in the church, in community with others, we find God's grace and the way to a holy life. I know that is what we seek at St. Thomas, and I pray that together, as we follow him, we will continue to know God's peace, and comfort, and support. *Amen.*