**September 27, 2015 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost**

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It would seem that the disciples had not learned their lesson from last week’s Gospel because in today’s reading they’re at it again. This time they’re tattling on some other people who are casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Well, obviously, since THEY’RE traveling around with Jesus, they are the only TRUE disciples. The nerve of those wannabes trying to do disciples’ work! Tsk!

And once again, Jesus, with a sigh, sets them straight. Only this time he doesn’t go as easy on them. Oh, at first, his rebuke is pretty mild. “Don’t stop them,” he says, “because anyone, and by anyone I mean ANYONE, not just you guys, who does a deed of power in my name is on our side. In fact, if anyone who so much as gives you a drink of water because you follow me will be rewarded by God.” The verse doesn’t end with “So there,” but maybe that was lost in antiquity.

Jesus says something downright foreign, at least to my ears, in the midst of this little chat. He says, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” What? That’s not how that goes! It should be “Whoever is not for us is against us,” right? I seem to recall a certain incident at the start of the second Gulf War involving renaming French fries to “freedom fries,” for instance. Or maybe, whoever is not MY denomination or doesn’t follow MY rules isn’t really Christian. It’s not hard to find examples of that mind set.

But here, Jesus is turning that idea on its head. And if he’d left it at that, we could have a nice discussion about what it means to be for or against someone, and how that plays out in our world today. And maybe someday we will.

But we just can’t ignore the next several verses, no matter how much we might want to. They’re pretty darned gruesome:

*If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell., And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

Yikes! That’s some pretty scary stuff. Hang a millstone around your neck and be thrown into the sea? Cut off your hand or foot, or gouge out your eye, to prevent yourself from being thrown into hell? And the hell Jesus is talking about here is not nice, neat, maybe even rather pleasant Hades. No, it’s Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, somewhere outside of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, Gehenna was the place that the worshipers of the pagan gods sacrificed children. It was considered a cursed place and became associated with the purification and/or destruction of the wicked.

In the New Testament Gahenna is used to describe the opposite of the Kingdom of God, and, according to Matthew, is a place where both body and soul could be destroyed. Throughout the Bible Gahenna is associated with unquenchable fire. It used to be thought that it was a garbage pile outside of Jerusalem where trash and even bodies and other nastiness were thrown and burned, but apparently there is no archeological or literary evidence to back that up. Regardless, it’s not a place you want to bring the kiddies!

I’m reasonably sure that Jesus didn’t mean us to keep the bone saws and eye spoons handy in case we screw up. But I am also reasonably sure that this strong language is there on purpose to make a point that this is serious business.

It revolves around the idea of stumbling. In our language, stumbling usually means a little trip, like I do on every rug I ever step on. Or it means to make a little gaffe, as in stumbling over your words when you’re trying to make a point. But the word in Greek – *skandalidzo*, from which we get our words scandal and scandalize – has a more serious meaning. In Biblical Greek it means “to cause to sin” or “the hinder right conduct.” There’s also an implication of a snare or a trap, implying that someone does this to someone else on purpose.

Trapping someone into sinning on purpose. Now THAT’S some nasty stuff. In our modern world this might look like turning someone into a drug dealer or a prostitute, or convincing a child to steal from its parents or those looking after it. But those are pretty much outside of our experience for the most part, at least I hope.

But what are some other ways we could cause either someone else, or ourselves, to stumble into sin. Well, there the list gets a little longer and more realistic. How about inciting someone on the Internet to hate someone else? Or trying to get someone to hate themselves? How about encouraging racism. Just throw a little racist bomb into a conversation and sit back and watch the fun. Or how about convincing ourselves to cheat or lie or steal “just a little bit” in order to get ahead. White collar crime is where no one gets hurt, right? Doesn’t count if you don’t get caught, right? I’m sure you could come up with your own list pretty quickly.

But Jesus is saying that it’s not just the sin that’s bad, but even encouraging someone (or yourself) to sin has the potential to land you in a lake of unquenchable fire.

And then, at the end of this passage, after all that direness, comes a phrase that wouldn’t be out of place in a fortune cookie, but really it’s at the heart of this whole passage:

*For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*

Let me just unpack that passage a little. In the Middle East, salt was one of the most valuable commodities there was. It was like gold. Without refrigeration, salt was pretty much the only way to preserve food, and of course make it taste better. It was also a symbol of hospitality and of harmony. And finally, it was used in the animal sacrifices at the Temple, so it had a ritual importance.

And in this passage we see a different kind of fire from the fires of Gehenna – this is a purifying fire. So another way to put that first sentence would be, “For everyone will be preserved and seasoned with a purifying fire.” It makes it sound less like a barbecue and more like the people of God being made ready for the Kingdom of God.

The next sentence is just plain crazy. Salt, as in sodium chloride, can’t technically become unsalty. However, upon Googling, I found another way of looking at it that makes sense. It’s from a website called “Ask a Scientist.” In answer to the question of whether salt could lose its saltiness, he said no – it’s a stable compound. However, he goes on to say:

*Historically, salt has been obtained from crude sources such as salt marshes, and minerals such as rock salt. This contains the stable sodium chloride plus other components. Sodium chloride is readily water-soluble, so if this crude salt were exposed to condensation or rain water, the sodium chloride could be dissolved and removed, and the salt could in effect lose its saltiness.*

*Also, the salty flavour is detected by our sense of taste. If there were a physiological change in the functioning of our taste buds, salt consumed may no longer taste the same, but this would not be due to any inherent change in the salt itself.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

So, to carry the metaphor even further, our saltiness could be corrupted, especially if it’s only superficial, leaving only hard stones behind. Or we could lose our ability to detect the saltiness in others through bitterness, anger, distraction, or apathy. So Jesus’ answer to that is to carry our salt on the inside so that, as our Compline prayer puts it, “we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in [God’s] eternal changelessness.”

And then we come to Jesus’ final command to us – to be at peace with one another. This passage has taken us on quite a journey. The disciples, and we through them, are told that anyone who isn’t against Jesus and his followers is for them, and that there isn’t room in God’s kingdom for jealousy. We are told not to cause ourselves and others to stumble and fall into sin. We are told that God will purify us and preserve us for his Kingdom if we let him. And we are told to carry that purity and preservation inside ourselves, and to be at peace.

Those are some tall orders. But Jesus didn’t say to be at peace sitting all alone in your room. He said to be at peace with one another. We aren’t in this discipleship alone. We are a community of believers, in this together. And we are in it with Jesus, every step of the way.

Jesus is the salt that we carry inside us always – the salt of preservation, the salt of hospitality, the savor in our lives, and the salt of concord and peace. Make room in your heart and your life for him and let him work.

Amen.

1. <http://askascientist.co.uk/chemistry/can-salt-lose-its-saltyness>, viewed 9/27/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)