
Sacrifice and Salt

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 29 September 2024

Numbers 11:24b-29 • James 5:13-20 • Mark 9:42-50



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Another rather startling passage in our Gospel this morning:

If your hand makes you lose your faith, cut it off!
If your foot makes you lose your faith, cut it off!
If your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! (Mark 9:43-7)

We're all rather attached — pun intended — to our hands, and feet, and eyes, I think. They are useful things to have, and for Jesus to tell us to get rid of them is a bit shocking.

But as usual, he is trying to get our attention. Remember that Jesus is speaking these words out loud to his disciples and anyone else around. The people at that time were used to hearing preachers in the street, often shouting out warnings and dire prophecies. Some were true prophets, some were false. There were

many rabbis with smaller or larger followings. They too taught their disciples in the public places. One preacher's message might merge into another, and the people might well end up just tuning them out. So Jesus used very graphic and startling images to get and keep his disciples' attention.

Jesus wants us to start thinking. How valuable is my hand? With one hand, I couldn't play guitar. I couldn't pick up heavy items that you use both hands for. How valuable are my eyes? Could I read, drive safely, or any number of things, without my eyes? There's an expression I don't hear too often anymore: I'd give my right arm for ... something, whatever it is. What would I give up my hands or eyes for? Would I give them up to save my own life?

Bingo. Jesus is talking about life. (Last week the children told us) (the Bible talks) about running the race to gain eternal life. It is a goal worth working toward, and one we should put all our effort into gaining. But to gain any goal requires some sacrifice. Any serious athlete will tell you they gave up some other hobby or activity or pleasure in order to spend all their time focussing on the one thing they really want to gain: success in their sport. Single-minded focus is what it often takes to really excel. I'm sure many of you made sacrifices to follow a course of study, a career path, or to acquire a great skill of some kind. We all have different goals in our lives that we work toward.

But the one goal we all ought to be striving toward is to attain the Kingdom of God, everlasting life in God's immediate presence.

Hands and feet and eyes are, of course, metaphorical, and part of Jesus' exaggeration for effect. What might they stand for in your life? Now we need to take a step further. Jesus is not talking about giving up football in order to excel in cricket, or giving up the violin in order to focus on oil painting. Jesus asks us to consider: what are the things that are holding us back from deepening our faith? If you feel that studying the Bible more diligently might increase your faith, but other activities in your life crowd it out, how might you refocus? What other, probably enjoyable, activities could you give up? It will be different for everyone, and requires some soul-searching.

This is a useful interpretation of Jesus' words. But there is another meaning as well. Our Good News translation says, "If your hand makes you lose your faith ..."; but earlier translations said, "if your hand offends thee." The Greek verb is σκανδαλίζω, from which we get our word "scandalise", but the meaning is truly, "cause to sin." "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." Again, Jesus is exaggerating for effect; one's hands or eyes or feet do not cause one to sin — sin is from the heart and the intention. But if you know that sin will break your relationship with God and put heaven at risk for you, you will do anything to stop that sin. It's that serious. Jesus is saying: Don't risk it! If you have to change your life, sacrifice anything, to align yourself with God, do it! The

alternative, eternal alienation from God, “where the fire that burns you is never put out,” is too horrible to think about.

This is about as fire and brimstone as I get. But if we truly believe in God, if we truly trust in Jesus, then we must be realistic about what God promises us, both the wonderful good and the horrible bad, as revealed to us in the Bible, which is God’s self-revelation to us. All Jesus asks is that we love him and follow him.

Our Gospel passage ends with three sayings about salt. The middle one is my favourite: “Salt is good; but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?” (Mark 9:50) Jesus is speaking of the life of a Christian in a largely non-Christian world. We all know that salt enhances flavour. Speaking metaphorically, the flavour of the world around us is often far from sweet. The world without God, in which God’s own people do not follow God, can be a barren and dismal place. We as Christians are charged by Jesus with bringing Good News into a world which sorely needs it: through us, God brings the seasoning of his grace, which makes everything better. We are the true salt of the earth. We rejoice that God uses us in this way.

Let us then celebrate and give praise to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who leads us into ways of justice and peace, as we look forward to the reunion with our God and Father in heaven. Amen.