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September 30, 2018

Stumbling Blocks and Salt
Mark 9:38-50

Today we continue in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9.

The disciples have just ***finished arguing*** about who is the greatest, to which Jesus says if you want to be great you must be ***servant*** of all, and welcome the little ones, ***like a child***.

Now the disciples are again having a ***disagreement***, and Jesus has some ***hard words*** about how to live as his followers, about ***who's on his side and who's not***.

Hear the ***word of the Lord*** for you today:

*John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone^[a] casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ **Whoever is not against us is for us.** ⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.*

⁴² *"If any of you put a **stumbling block** before one of these little ones who believe in me,^[b] it would be better for you if a great **millstone** were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ 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,^[c] to the unquenchable fire.^[d] ⁴⁵ 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.^[e]^[f] ⁴⁷ 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,^[g] ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.⁴⁹ "For everyone will be salted with fire.^[h] ⁵⁰ **Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?^[i] **Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.**"***

Well, have you watched any news this week?

If you have, you know that things have been heated.

People ***on either side*** of the Supreme Court nominee's confirmation have been very riled up.

Lots of ***strong words from all corners***—
Republicans, Democrats, and everyone in between.

Why?

Why are people so ***up in arms*** about this?

We could probably name ***many different issues***—
the future of the ***Court*** and previous decisions,
the issue of ***truth and allegations***,
what happens to families on both sides,
and what happens to survivors of sexual abuse, harassment and assault,
especially those who speak out.

None of these issues is ***small potatoes***, right?
There seems to be a lot riding on this process!

Maybe that's part of understanding the strong rhetoric,
the passionate pleas, the protests and demonstrations.

Sometimes, people rise up in anger and demonstration out of ***FEAR***.
We've certainly seen that this past year with ***white nationalism***—
Those who want to prevent people of color from taking over society.
We've seen that when ***politicians on the right and left use our fears***
to cause an ***uproar***—whether it's immigration, money, crime, education,
equal rights, or religious freedom.

But isn't there ***another reason*** why people get so riled up,
why they might even go over the edge a little bit?

When have YOU felt really ***passionate*** about something?
How did you speak?
What did you say?

Did you say something like *well, this really doesn't matter,*
but here's how I feel, take it or leave it?
Did you casually make a little remark and then change the subject?

Or did you say something like
Hey--I can't believe this....

***This is incredible...
This is unbelievable....
Listen to this!***

How do we speak when we are passionate about something?
When we really, really care?
We speak with vivid ***detail***, and great ***emphasis***,
We talk like we ***mean it***.
Sometimes we are ***even a little colorful*** with our language, you know?

When we are passionate about something,
we might join a protest, carry a sign, or write to our representatives....

Which brings us to ***our Biblical story today***.
When I read first read this story, I was struck with how ***harsh Jesus sounds***.
This is not the blonde haired, blue eyed, arms outstretched, surrounded by
lambs and kids, 'Children's Bible Cover Jesus', is it?
This Jesus is using some ***incredibly strong language***.

Why?
Well, let's take the first part first.
The ***disciples see someone else***, not a disciple, casting out demons.
And they come to Jesus whining about it,
almost like tattle-tailing.
They say, ***we saw him doing this and we tried to stop him,
because he was not following us!***
They are ***proud*** of the fact that they are keeping discipleship
Only among the 12 of them!

(and on a side note, this whole thing is a little ***ironic*** because in Mark 9:28-29
the disciples are not able to cast out a demon, because they didn't pray!)

They are proud of their actions against this other healer,
But ***Jesus is not happy—***
***He says, don't stop them, anyone doing a deed of power in my name
can't speak evil of me,
whoever is not against us is for us!***
Zing!

This is ***not what they expected*** to hear.
 They were expecting a pat on the back, and instead Jesus says—
look folks, you are not the only people doing ministry!
 Wow.

And then Jesus gets into what I would call some ***harsh language***.
 It would be better to put a millstone around your neck and drown than to
 cause one of mine to stumble!
 Now every household would have a handheld millstone for grinding grain,
 but Jesus was talking about the ***giant millstone*** in the middle of the village--
 the one pulled by oxen, that would quickly sink you to the bottom of the sea!

And Jesus doesn't even stop there!
 If your ***hand*** causes you to stumble, cut it off!
 Your ***foot***? Cut it off! Your eye? Gouge it out!
 Better that, then going into hell!
 What?
Jesus, you said what?

You're telling us that if we cause someone else to stumble
 we might as well go to ***Gehenna***
 (which is the Greek word here that we translate as hell in this story.
 And Gehenna was an actual place outside Jerusalem,
 where children were once sacrificed,
 and garbage was burned during the time of Jesus)
 It was a symbol for extreme horror, punishment and spiritual death.
 So when Jesus says gouge out your bad eye, because that's better than going to
 Gehenna....***Yikes!***

But Jesus doesn't stop there either....***he just keeps on going with his analogy***,
 until finally he says:
 For everyone will be salted with fire.
Salt is good, unless it loses it's saltiness,
Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.
 Hmm.

I'm sorry, Jesus, but ***I'm still stuck*** on the fact that we should gouge out our
 eyes or cut off our feet if they cause us to stumble...
What?

So *what's going on here?*

Well can all agree that Jesus is pretty *passionate* in his language?

But what is he really passionate *about?*

Well, he is telling us *what to avoid* in life.

That is pretty clear.

He's saying: *Don't cause someone else to sin.*

Don't cause someone else to stumble.

and don't let anything in your life cause you to stumble!

*Do whatever it takes to **avoid** it!*

Well, that's some *good advice*, isn't it?

We shouldn't put stumbling blocks in the way of anyone else.

If we've got a bad habit going, we should avoid dragging anyone else into it,
and we should do whatever it takes to help get out of it ourselves.

If we're doing something wrong, we should *stop*,
and *not encourage others* to do it.

But could Jesus be telling us something more?

What else is he so passionate about?

What is the *opposite* of causing someone to stumble?

Is it *helping one another* along this road called life?

Is it *seeing others trying to do good, and encouraging* them?
not stopping them!

We shouldn't cause anyone to stumble,
or keep doing bad ourselves,
because Jesus *cares so much---so much—*
about our *hearts, and our community*.

Why do you think Jesus says:

Salt is good, unless it's lost its saltiness?

He talks about this, not only in Mark, but also Matthew 5.

What is salt really?

Salt is a *strong chemical compound*.

It doesn't just go bad, or break down.
So why does Jesus mention it **losing** it's saltiness?

Because salt could be **diluted**.
For people in Jesus' day that might be water, or rocks or sand.
If a seller of salt wanted to cheat someone,
they could dilute the salt with **white sand**—making it completely useless.

Salt only has value when it's **really salt**.
Not when it's diluted.

So it's interesting to think about what things **keep us from being the salt**
in the world all around us?
Aren't there things that **dilute** our faith—and cause us to lose saltiness?

Jesus says: *Salt is Good.*
Have salt in yourselves.

Salt was super **important** in the ancient world—
it was the only way to really **preserve perishable food** like meat and fish.
It was a **seasoning** for food.
It preserved the sacrificial **offerings**.
It was a cleansing agent for **wounds**.
New **babies** were washed in salt water,
Basically salt was a **life-preserver**.

Salt was also a **community preserver**.
Salt was also a way to **preserve a contract** with someone.
Sometimes a **covenant** was sealed with salt—some from your house, some
from mine, and we would throw it across one another's shoulders.
(These Covenants are found in Numbers 18:19 and 11 Chronicles 13:5).
Salt was also used as **currency**, which is where we get our phrase,
'he's worth his salt'.

Salt is good, says Jesus.
Have salt in yourselves.

In other words, **be a life-preserver**, not a life-taker.
Not a life-robber.

Causing other people to stumble is taking away their life.
 Causing others to sin is **robbing them** of a good life.
 Continuing in our own sin is **robbing us** of a real life.

Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Be at peace with one another.
 Now that's a **tall order**, isn't it?

Why do people get **so riled up** about things,
 the way Jesus was about stumbling blocks?
 Because they **care**.
 They really care.

Jesus was incredibly **passionate**.
About what?

About **US!**
 About **preserving our lives**.
 About **us preserving one another's** lives.

This is not just some talk about cutting off body parts that cause you to sin.
 This is about **building up the community** of faith,
 And the **family** of God.

The disciples are all so proud that they have tried to exclude someone
 doing good **outside** their group.
 But Jesus wants them to widen the circle,
 to include **anyone and everyone** who is working for good,
 and anyone using his name.
 Because **anyone** who is not against us is for us!
 Jesus cares about **building up the community** of faith,
 And the **family of God**.

And as we've heard in previous weeks through our study of Mark,
 that's **no easy task**.
 It means all of us being **followers** of Jesus, not our own leaders.
 It means being a **servant** of all, instead of being served.
 It means taking up a **cross** of self-sacrifice.

It means **welcoming** others, especially the **least** and the little.

Jesus' passionate plea about gouging out your eye, or cutting off your foot,
Is really about him **loving us so much** that he wants to preserve our lives,
And our community!

Do we want that?

Do we want to **preserve life**?

Do we want to preserve **community**—both inside and outside the church?

Our **culture** says 'don't bother', it's us vs. them!

Our **churches** sometimes say the same thing—
don't bother with building community, it's too hard,
unless we all think and look the same.

Famous Pastor Archbishop William Temple once said,
*"the church is the only organization that exists for those
who are **not** its members."*

Do we realize that Christian faith is **not really about just us in here**,
but also the whole **world** out there?

And, Jesus is asking us—do we want to **preserve life**?

Do we want to **preserve community**?

Both inside and outside the church?

Good questions, right?

At times it seems we are **so wrapped up in being 'right'**

That we forget to preserve life, and community....

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Not all the rhetoric this past week has been from a good place.

I suspect that some of it is not, because we are all just **human**.

I suspect that some of it is coming from a **place of fear** as well.

But some of it—comes from **good people and good hearts**—
people who want to **build up** this crazy world,
people who want **truth**,
people who want **justice and grace and mercy**,
and so they are **passionate** about what they say and do.

It's a very difficult world out there, and a difficult time right now.

But I encourage ***you to look for God*** in this crazy mess.

Because God is with us—right in the middle.

I urge you to ***look for Jesus*** wherever you can find Him.

I exhort you ***to preserve life, and community,***

because Jesus always asks that of us.

I believe that somehow Jesus will ***use the people*** and the world,
to help us ***find our way as His followers, and to bring goodness.***

May we be willing to ***widen the circle*** of those who are for goodness.

May we ***welcome those*** who are on the side of God.

And ***hear from those*** who are not against us.

May we ***take care***, special care,
to ***NOT cause others to stumble,***
or to stay in our own bad ways.

Instead, let's ***welcome the grace of God—***

And the ***salt*** of being a Christian—

So we can ***preserve life, and community,***
and ***be at peace with one another!***

That is the ***Good News*** of the Gospel this day.

And for this Good News, ***all God's people say, Amen.***