

A Line in the Sand

^{NRS} **Mark 9:38** John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone 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, 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, to the unquenchable fire.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁶ 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,⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.⁴⁹ "For everyone will be salted with fire."⁵⁰ 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."

A Line in the Sand

I suspect that most of us heard some stories when we were children that really stuck with us - and helped to form the way we see the world. It suddenly hit me the other day that, both consciously and unconsciously, one of the stories I heard as a child has had more effect on me than I probably realized. Children in Texas learn Texas history in addition to U.S. and world history, partly because native Texans are sinfully proud of their heritage. Many of them are quick to remind everybody else that Texas won her independence from Mexico, was a sovereign nation, and then chose to join the United States – and they can be pretty obnoxious, overbearing, and boorish about it.

Movies and TV have generally portrayed the Texans as Anglos fighting against the Mexicans for their freedom. What often gets lost in the telling is that most of the Texans seeking independence from Mexico were Hispanic, not Anglo. But always told is the story of “the line in the sand.” General Santa Anna led a large force up from central Mexico and they laid siege to a mission church called the Alamo. Inside was a small group of Texans, Anglo and Hispanic. When Santa Anna flew the red flag, indicating that the Mexican army would give no quarter in future battles, a decision had to be made – stay, and eventually die before the overwhelming Mexican army, or surrender. Colonel William B. Travis assembled all of the men in the courtyard. With his sword he drew a line in the sand. He would not command his volunteer force to stay and fight, but those who stepped over the line in the sand to stand beside him would stay and fight their last battle. Colonel Jim Bowie lay bedridden from a wound. After a moment of tense silence, the man for whom the bowie knife is named, said, “Gentlemen, I appear to be on the wrong side of the line,” and his bed was carried over the line to be beside Colonel Travis.” So goes the legend. I don’t know if it happened, but I know that it is true. The story rings with the truth that you must draw a line in the sand, you must set boundaries, you must find out who will leave and who will be faithful. Who’s in, who’s out? Who’s us, and who’s other?

Today’s passage in the Gospel of Mark looks like an odd collection of sayings, jumbled together here at the end of a chapter. There’s talk about cups of water, cutting off arms, drowning, hell, salt, and some stranger casting out demons. What a tumbled together, jumbled up, helter-skelter pile of images! But on further consideration, I think that today’s passage can be properly heard as a continuation of last week’s text from Mark. In it, we saw that the disciples had been arguing about hierarchy. Which one was greatest, who was the leader? Jesus turned the issue on its head and said, “If you want to be important, you have to be everybody’s servant.” To drive the point home, he took a powerless child, and told them to welcome, to give high regard to, the overlooked, the insignificant, and those who are worthless in the eyes of society.

Today's passage picks up at that point. John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name. We kept trying to stop him, because he wasn't following us." At this point, it helps to remember that earlier in this chapter, the disciples have failed to cast out a demon. Now they've run across someone who is casting out demons, but he isn't one of the disciples. "We can't do this, but he can, and we couldn't get him to stop. And ... and..., well, it just isn't right! We're your main men here and this guy won't do what we tell him!" Do you hear the issues here? Our pride? Our importance? Our leadership and control? Just as the disciples weren't ready to accept a child as though she was Jesus, neither are they ready to accept an outsider doing good work and giving the credit to Jesus.

Jesus replies with some common sense advice. "Don't try to stop him. Think about it. If he's doing powerful work in my name, he can hardly turn around and say evil things about me, can he?" Then Jesus follows with this aphorism, this saying. "Whoever is not against us is for us." If he isn't hindering us, then he's letting us succeed. Here the disciples have been thinking of him as an outsider, an irritant, a threat to their authority, and Jesus says, "Leave him alone. He isn't hurting us – in fact, he's helping us by doing good deeds, powerful deeds, and giving the glory and credit to me." Jesus goes on to say, "Think about it. Even someone who offers you a drink of water, because you are one of my followers, is helping us spread the good news of what life is like when God is in charge of your heart. Their compassion and hospitality is a credit to them." A cup of water is a simple thing, but it's a great metaphor for meeting life at the point where there is a need. When our ministry intersects with life where the need is great, we are in a very real sense joining the human race, and we find joy and fulfillment, often to our own surprise.

Suddenly, it seems, Jesus shifts topics. "If any of you put a stumbling block in the path of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better if you had a big stone tied around your neck and you had been thrown into the sea." In the first century, most mills were operated by hand and were small. Some, though, were larger, and the millstone had to be rotated by animal power, often a donkey. Jesus has chosen to use the larger millstone, a great millstone, to drive his point home. It's sort of like we don't say, "I feel like I've been run over by a Miata." Instead, for emphasis, we say, "I feel like I've been hit by a Mack truck." The "little one" in this passage is someone who is still in the early stages of their faith journey, someone who has not yet developed spiritual muscles, whose knowledge and faith is still small and tender. Jesus says, "Be careful that you don't trip them up." The word used in the old manuscripts is the word "scandalize." Don't scandalize those who are young in the faith, because it may trip them. The big examples come to mind readily – the famous minister who pockets the money for a luxurious lifestyle, the local pastor who acts inappropriately with children or the choir director, the famous evangelist who rails against drugs and loose sexual relationships but takes drugs and pays for companionship. Those outside the church may paint all church leaders as hypocritical snake oil salesmen and stay away. The little ones in the faith wonder if there's any way to sort out the trustworthy from the untrustworthy, and so they stumble, and wander away from the church. But it isn't just church officers that can scandalize and trip those who are still weak in the faith. Don't sing "Jesus loves me , , . little ones to him belong" on Sunday – and on Tuesday leave a stingy tip for a struggling waitress, a little one on our culture. The phrase, "Whoever causes one to stumble" makes us think of Fagin in Oliver Twist teaching children to pick pockets – and we feel righteous, but in our interrelated, intertwined world, indifference is not a righteous option. Don't marvel over the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, but never put any food in the little red wagon in the hallway. When there's a disconnect between what you say you believe and what you do, it can cause someone who's just entering the kingdom to turn around and leave.

Then Jesus begins to talk about amputating body parts and about hell. In the little towns in south Texas where I spent my summers with my grandparents, there was no municipal garbage collection. There was, however, the town dump. When your trash and garbage accumulated and got stinky, you took it to the town dump. It wasn't neatly encapsulated in a nice black plastic bag that kept the odor, the fuzzy stuff, and the ooze neatly sealed away. Instead, it was in a garbage can and you held your breath as you emptied it out at the town dump. There was always a fire consuming the paper and wood, and adding ash and smoke to the clouds of flies. Nasty place! You never went to the dump right before or right after

mealtime. If you think I'm trying to gross you out, you're right. Because that is just how the disciples would have heard these next few sentences. We read "go to hell," but they heard "go to Gehenna." Gehenna is the valley of Hinnom, a valley just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Centuries before Christ, it was a place that was notorious for infant sacrifices to pagan gods. Now, it was the city dump. It was as repulsive and nasty a place as anyone could imagine. There was always a fire burning the dry trash. There were always maggots writhing in the wet garbage.

Jesus is using very colorful and powerful images here. He says, you're worried about who's in and who's out? Let's talk about you. Are you striding along the Way? Are you moving along on the path that takes you deeper and deeper into God's kingdom? Or, are you stumbling over your own two feet? Are you tripping yourself up? Are you headed further in – or staggering out?" I've heard lots of sermons that warned about the eye that can't stay away from pornography, the hand that wanders where it doesn't belong, and the feet that can carry you to dens of iniquity. Don't box Jesus up so that he's always talking about Puritan morality. His message is about all of life. Do we spend hours eyeballing the flickering TV screen across the room, but can't seem to find the time to see the suffering folks in our community? Do our hands reach out to grasp the enticing objects and trinkets in the beautiful catalogs that fill our mailbox, but seldom reach out in hospitality or to hand a meal to the hungry? Do our feet carry us to the store, the stadium, the restaurant, and the theater, but seldom to worship or Bible study or to visit a shut-in? In essence, Jesus is posing a choice. Is our Christianity merely a matter of taste and convenience, something to lay aside at the slightest difficulty or inconvenience? Something that we do if our eye, our hand, or our feet haven't distracted us from it? Jesus says that it's better to get rid of our distractions - than to end up with ourselves and all of our stuff in the nasty city dump, where the worms never die off, and the fire is never quenched.

Then Jesus turns to the image of salt and saltiness. Salt came primarily from the Dead Sea and it was a combination of many chemicals. The sodium chloride, what we call salt, could leach out depending on how it was stored, and what was left had none of the taste or preservative qualities of salt and was worthless, trash to be thrown away.

Who's in? Who's out? Where's the boundary between the saved and the lost? Between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of mankind? Jesus says, "Don't focus on I'm in and you're out. Don't spend your energy trying to be in charge and important. Look for the least among you and serve their needs. If someone in the church across town is doing good works and giving the glory to God, don't try to stop them. Jesus insinuates that the one doing good work and giving God the glory and those who help with small acts of mercy are living in the realm of God. But more important than trying to figure out if someone else is outside the boundary, pay attention to whether you're drawing them into the kingdom or repelling them. Think about where you are in the kingdom. Are you headed toward the center, or distracted and stumbling around and headed for the dump? Are you salty and full of zest, or is your enthusiasm and spiciness leaching away?" We want to draw a line in the sand and check to see where everybody else is. Jesus takes a sandaled foot, erases the line, and says, "It isn't about boundaries, it's about direction." Are you, am I, headed in the right direction? Amen.