

Year B Proper 26 Mark 9 verses 38 to 50

*...it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell...*

Boy, this is fiery stuff. For a preacher who likes to give rousing sermons about hellfire and damnation, this Gospel today would be a dream come true.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye, causes you to stumble, cut it out...It sounds like Jesus is talking about following the rules no matter what the cost. It's about right and wrong, black and white, being perfect or not perfect, and if you're not perfect, you're going to be punished. But is this really the message Jesus wants us to hear?

We are picking up today where we left off last week. Jesus is sitting with the child still in his arms, having just told his disciples that to be great in God's kingdom means turning the world's idea of power and status upside down. Jesus is trying to get his disciples to stop thinking in worldly terms – the way of “empire” that believes power lies in your position, your property, and your pocketbook. John interrupts Jesus to put his lack of understanding on full display.

It's as if your friend has been lamenting to you about how hard she is struggling to lose the 10 pounds she's gained during the COVID lockdowns and you interrupt her to say, “Hey, a new pizza place just opened up. We should go split a large ‘everything but the kitchen sink’ with extra cheese.” Your friend likely thinks you didn't hear a word she just said. If you were listening, you certainly didn't understand.

So, as Jesus yet again bangs his head against the proverbial brick wall, he tries a new tactic with his disciples and comes out with some pretty shocking things. It starts off quite tame – whoever isn't against us is for us – but soon he's talking about cutting off body parts and saying things like, “it's better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye

than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.” Some of what he’s saying doesn’t even make sense. I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not but, if you have two properly functioning eyes, if one of your eyes is looking at something then your other eye is too. You can’t just get rid of one eye.

Jesus shuts down John’s worldly way of thinking about who’s in and who’s out, who’s great and who’s not, and steers the conversation back to the little one still in his arms and hammers home the point he has been trying to make. He does this with some shocking statements meant to grab us by the scruff of the neck and shake us out of the human way of thinking, laying out some grim consequences for those disciples who just don’t get it.

The church has always struggled with “getting it”, we have always struggled with allowing the worldly way of thinking to guide our faith and spirituality around issues of right and wrong, about who was in and who was out, who was going to be rewarded by God and who was going to be punished.

This isn’t new...We saw it 200 years ago when ‘civilized’ countries were arguing about whether to keep slavery or not. More recently we saw the same concerns in our discussions over marriage equality and assisted dying. And right now, we are living through the struggle between the world’s idea of power and God’s concept of power in the way people react to being asked, or told, to do things they don’t want to do in the efforts to end the pandemic.

No surprise, then, we find these concerns in the Gospel, too. We hear Jesus today talking about reward and punishment and we hear the disciples expressing concern about who’s in and who’s out.

The disciples had come across someone casting out demons in Jesus' name but because he wasn't part of their group, the disciples told him to stop. They were more concerned about following rules, and who was "in" or "out" than they were about rejoicing in God's healing power working in the world. Jesus must explain to his disciples that it's actually good when people are healed from sickness and *even better* when they are doing it in his name!

The disciples have missed the point again, and this is where Jesus gets cheeky. Jesus offers them two highly exaggerated scenarios to help them understand what the life of faith is really about.

On the one hand, Jesus explains that if anyone offers them a cup of cold water that person's divine reward is assured. On the other hand, Jesus explains that if we are to avoid punishment, we should cut off whatever body part causes our temptation.

If we were to take this literally, we would all be sitting here missing some body parts...perhaps a limb, maybe an eyeball, and more than likely our tongues. And, I'm pretty sure it takes more than giving a cup of cold water to a disciple to have eternal life. But Jesus is laying out the extremes to say something profoundly important about the way we understand faith.

Notice how ridiculously high Jesus sets the bar is when faith is centered in avoiding punishment by trying to live a perfect life without sin. Thou shalt not covet...oops, there goes an eyeball. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain...how many of us would be missing tongues? We can't do it. We can't be perfect. We'll all be mutilated and maimed and worried about doing anything at all in case we sin and are punished.

Now, notice on the other hand how ridiculously low the bar is when faith is centered in acts of generosity. One cup of cold water. That's it. One cup is enough for an eternal reward.

Jesus lays out before us two options: the human, worldly way of categorizing, segregating, and excluding based on perfect rule-following and the consequences for failure. This way of "Thou shalt not..." divides us and immobilizes us. The other way is the way of the cup of cold water – God's way of abundant mercy, grace, and forgiveness, a way that fosters generosity and love.

The "thou shalt not" way breeds very rigid rule-followers who make more and more rules to be sure that they don't break the first rules until the 10 commandments have turned into 100's of rules. The "thou shalt not" way of thinking believes in a God who will punish us – his followers – when we fall short of the demanded perfection. This breeds fear rather than love. St. Augustine wisely wrote that a person who avoids sinning because of the awaiting hellfire is not afraid of sinning but of burning.

The rigid rule followers who won't bend, who won't deviate, who believe they know precisely what God thinks, tend to place themselves in the judgement seat that is reserved only for God. Jesus corrected our well-intentioned misunderstanding of all the "Thou shalt not's" by flipping them around and condensing them into the "Thou shalls." Thou shall love God. Thou shall love yourself. Thou shall love your neighbour.

This is the way of the cup of cold water – the ways that rests on the belief that God loves us, reaches out to us in relationship, and when we inevitably fall short and grow thirsty, offers us not punishment but water, the cold waters of life to revive us.

So we can spend our lives being afraid of burning, being unreasonably hard on ourselves and others or we can spend our lives in being extraordinarily and abundantly

generous with each other and with ourselves. And when we do that, when we live in love and generosity we will follow the rules that matter, and we will bend them when we need to.

Back when I was teaching, I was, one year, taking over a Grade 1 classroom for a teacher about to go on maternity leave, she was giving me the run-down on her class and said I should be aware that one young girl's mum was in hospital, dying of AIDS. What I expected next were words of compassion. What I heard was, "But it serves her right...she was doing drugs. She was infected by a dirty needle." I was stunned. Here was a good Roman Catholic teacher, who went to church every Sunday, wagging her finger in judgement at a drug addict. "Thou shalt not do drugs...You deserve what you get." What she was saying was that God was punishing that woman. I don't buy that for a second. Yes, we have consequences for our choices in life but God does not want us to suffer, God did not want that woman to die a painful death, God didn't want her 6 year old daughter to grow up without a mother. God wants us to repent and turn to Him, and to each other, in love...holding out the cold cup of water to a thirsty world.

The disciples were firmly stuck in the "Thou shalt not..." way of operating. That's what they were taught from day 1. You followed the rules and shunned those who didn't. You ignored people who were afflicted because they must have broken the rules...God was punishing them, wasn't He? We need only look to Jesus and the woman at the well to see how it's done. She, too, was stuck in the "Thou shalt not..." way. She knew the rules...she wasn't about to speak to a man – a Jewish man, at that. But, Jesus spoke to her – not only was she a woman, but she'd had multiple husbands, was currently living with a man, and...ewww...she was a Samaritan. Our worldly way of "judgy" rule following would have us condemning her for a sinful way of life – she sounds like a bit of a "floozy" to us. But God's way of love and compassion would have us understanding

that, as a Samaritan woman, she had few rights and very little status – her dead husbands' male relatives were expected to marry her and she needed a man to give her care and shelter or she'd be begging on the street.

And Jesus breaks society's accepted rules of behaviour and asks her for a drink of cold water. He encourages her to break the rules, he guides her into the way of generosity. And, in doing so, gives her access to the water that permanently quenches her thirst...he offers her his mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Water holds special significance for us as Anglicans. When a cup of water is poured over our heads in baptism, it marks us as God's beloved, and binds us to our promise to forsake the world's ways and to live according to God's way. Jesus has given us the cup of water that quenches our thirst. Now he asks us to share that gift.

What does a cup of cold water look like in your hand?