

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 9:38-48

***"The Not So Nice Alternative"***

This week's Holy Gospel from Mark begins with these words, *"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."* (Mark 9:38) Jesus puts a stop to all this by telling John, *"Do not stop him, No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us."* (Mark 9:39-40) People just love to point fingers, for example, Jesus gave perfect clarity to those who brought Him the woman caught in adultery: I am sure you all are familiar with that story, as told in the Gospel of John chapter 8. *"When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again, he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."* (John 8:7-11) It has also been said in some translations that Jesus said, *"go and sin no more!"*

About the man who was exorcizing demons - Jesus begins by speaking with kindness and compassion when He tells them *"I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."* (Mark 9:41) This man was serving Christ's Kingdom in his stand against Satan, and Jesus also used the example of someone offering a cup of water to a person who bears *the name of Christ* was also serving the Kingdom. This was a great illustration to the apostles - that there are many who serve God and that He willingly uses other people and their gifts for furthering His Kingdom. I want to suggest to you that there are no unimportant services working for God. There are so many things needing to be done in the Kingdom, - I could give you a list! Jesus explained that giving a cup of cold water to a person in need is the same as giving an offering to God Himself. When Jesus said the hospitable person *"will certainly not lose his reward,"* He was not teaching that righteousness is attained by works. Our reward in God's Kingdom will not be on the basis of good deeds, but will be because of God's gracious promise to people of faith – those who believe in Him.

Then Jesus delivered the knockout punch to anyone who lead His people astray – hear what Jesus said: *"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck."* (Mark 9:42) A millstone is a heavy, flat stone primarily used to grind grain. There were two common kinds of millstones in use in ancient Israel. One was smaller and operated by a person. The larger one was connected to an ox or donkey, which would walk in a circle, causing the stone to roll and crush the grain. They are light, but very heavy. Could you imagine tying it around your neck – and then being thrown into the water? No thank you! Misleading believers carries tremendous penalties. Little *ones* could mean children, or even new believers. Children are innocent and trusting by nature. They trust adults; and because of that trust, their capacity to

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trust in God grows. God holds parents and others who influence young children - accountable for how they affect these little ones' ability to trust God and grow in Him. To cause a child or someone weak in the faith to sin means to purposely drive them off the path that Jesus prepared for them. Jesus warned that anyone who turns little children away from Him will receive severe punishment. And well they should! This is no joke. We have got to protect those who we have been given charge of and Jesus gives the example of something that the people of His day would be very familiar with – showing the seriousness of this behavior. To have a millstone tied around your neck and then be dumped into the sea meant certain death by drowning. It is interesting how our perspective can change how we learn things. Last night at this concert – Leonid and Friends, the lead singer, Serge, was excited because their next stop was Fort Lauderdale, and he was going to see the Atlantic Sea. It was made clear that it is now a sea – but an ocean. This man who lives in Russia has only seen seas – Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea – and he got so excited that he was going to be swimming in the Atlantic Ocean! We take into context the things that we are familiar with - and that is the thing that Jesus used as examples – to tell people this is no joke. It is serious. We need to protect those people and to take the most care of them. To have a millstone tied around your neck, then dumped into a body of water meant certain death by drowning. The horror of that kind of death was nothing compared to their punishment for all eternity.

Jesus takes His example a step further and He didn't mean for someone to literally cut off a part of their body; He meant that any relationship, practice, or activity that leads to sin has got to be stopped. People have got to be willing to "cut off" any temptation, habit, or part of their nature that could lead them to hold onto this world and turn away from Christ and then sin. He did not mean to cut off your hand or pluck out your eye – but to STOP doing the sinful behavior. We must turn away from it – and that is what repenting means - to turn away from behavior and turn back to God.. Jesus was saying just cutting off a limb that committed sin or plucking out an eye that looked with lust would still not get rid of sin, because sin begins in the heart and mind. It was just a few weeks ago in the Gospel that we heard Jesus say it is not what goes into a person's mouth that makes them unclean – but it is what comes out – from their heart. That is what makes a person unclean and that is the evil. Jesus is saying that people need to take drastic action to keep from stumbling.

Following Jesus means stopping something that is causing you to go down the wrong way. While none of us will ever be completely sin-free until we get to heaven, God wants us to have an attitude that rejects sin instead of one that holds on to it.

When Jesus speaks of Hell. I am sorry to go against what culture says, but there is a Hell – just as there is sin. Jesus tells of a place, that was called Gehenna, which was a garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley, to the south, right outside of Jerusalem. You had to go through the 'dung gate' to leave the city to get to Gehenna. It got the name “dung gate” because that was what people brought to be burned – and boy did it burn and seemed to burn forever. You know, it is true today - we don't run out of garbage. Trash is pretty nasty if you let it build up. It has to be taken

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care of, because if you let it sit around it will become infested. That is why the garbage and fires burned constantly. Worms were everywhere in this garbage dump - even with the constant fire. Jesus used words from Isaiah 66:24 to paint a picture of this not so nice place, which said, *"And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."* Jesus pictured the serious and eternal consequences of sin and the absolute destruction of God's enemies. Worms and fire characterized both internal and external pain. Hell is a place of unbearable and unending torment reserved for those who refuse to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Messiah, and that salvation and eternal life only comes through Him. If you remember, the night before Jesus died, He spoke, as recorded in John 14:6, He said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life – no one come to the Father but through Me."* I know I believe in Him with all my heart, and I trust in Him – and I do not want to hurt Him. So when I sin – I repent and I turn away from that behavior and ask for forgiveness. He has given us the invitation and all we need to do is accept and believe. We need to know that He believes us and loves us – that much!