

St. Andrew’s Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 9:38-48

“Words of Warning”

It has been said “when you point a finger at someone – there are three more pointing right back at you!” Placing blame on someone without looking at your own baggage is hypocritical. Calling out someone without looking in your own heart is called self-righteousness. Don’t assume that you are spotless when you make accusations. The Gospel 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 this finger pointing by tell John, *“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “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) I might also add that for finger pointers Jesus gave perfect clarity to those who brought to Him the woman caught in adultery: *“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!”*

It is not just finger pointing that Jesus addresses in this time with His disciples – but He addresses serious situations that will arise in the lives of these men who are being groomed as the Leaders of the Church. In effect Jesus is giving His disciples up close and personal lesson in inter-personal behavior – one that we all should pay attention to.

Jesus begins by speaking of 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) Not only did the man who exorcised demons serve Christ's kingdom in his stand against Satan, but even someone who offers a cup of water to a person who bears *the name of Christ* was also serving the kingdom. Good treatment of Christ's representatives is important to Jesus. The Apostles did have a special calling, but God willingly uses ALL people and all gifts for furthering his kingdom. I want to suggest to you that there are no "trivial" or unimportant services to God. Jesus explained that giving a cup of cold water to a person in need is the same as giving an offering to God. When Jesus said the hospitable person *“will certainly not lose his reward,”* He was not teaching that righteousness is attained by works. Our reward will be a place in God's kingdom and not on the basis of merit (a good deed), but because of God's gracious promise to people of faith – those who believe.

In my belief Jesus delivered the “haymaker” – the knockout punch to anyone who will lead His people astray – instructing, I am not pointing fingers at anyone, in any churches – but 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.”*

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(Mark 9:42) A millstone was a heavy, flat stone 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. Just look at the picture, with this verse, that I put together for you in your Bulletin.



This is a big millstone. Could you imagine tying it around your neck – and then being thrown into the water? I guess the modern example of that would be “cement shoes.” “Put some cement shoes on him and throw him in the Hudson River!” The Hudson is a river way up north. ☹️

While even small acts of kindness to believers carry great rewards, so acts of misleading believers will carry tremendous penalties. Little *ones* could mean children, or anyone considered to be insignificant or weak in faith, or new believers. Children are innocent and trusting by nature. They trust adults; and because of that trust, their capacity to trust in God grows. God holds parents and other adults 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 put a stumbling block in their way to make him or her trip and fall. Jesus warned that anyone who turns little children away from Him will receive severe punishment. This is not a joke. If our ambitions or rivalry causes young people or new Christians to doubt or fall back into sin, this is a grievous sin with terrible consequences, and Jesus uses an example of something that they would be very familiar with – to portray the gravity and seriousness of this behavior. Let me put it this way, to have a millstone tied around one's neck and then be dumped into the sea meant certain death by drowning. Even the horror of such a death was minor compared to what this person would face in eternity.

Jesus takes His example step further to give examples of what might make a person stumble into behavior that is sinful. Jesus did not mean, and please understand this, He didn't mean for someone to literally cut off a part of the body; He meant that any relationship, practice, or activity that leads to sin must be stopped. As a person would submit to losing a diseased hand or foot or a sense of sight in order to save his or her life, so believers should be just as willing to

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"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 into sin. Do you understand what I am saying? It is not cut off your hand or pluck put your eye – it is STOP doing the sinful behavior. Turn away from it – that is what repenting means. 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 that begins in the heart and mind. Remember just a few weeks ago that Jesus said 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 – that is the evil. Jesus was saying that people need to take drastic action to keep from stumbling.

Jesus explained that it would be better to have lost some worldly possession, attitude, or action than to keep it and *to go to hell* because of it. This is true, radical discipleship 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, what God wants is an attitude that renounces sin instead of one that holds on to sin. There is a story of a guy that goes to a doctor and says “doctor, doctor – it hurts when I do this.” What does the doctor say – “don't do that!” It makes sense – doesn't it? If it hurts to do, if it causes you to sin – don't do that! When Jesus speaks of Hell He tells of a place, that was called Gehenna, which is like the garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley, to the south, right outside of Jerusalem. You will laugh when I tell you the name of the gate that you needed to go through to get to Gehenna. It was called the “dung gate” because that was what people brought to be burned – and it burned. It seemed to burn forever. We don't run out of garbage, do we? Do we have our trash picked up every three weeks? I don't think so. We have it once a week on a specific day. Recycling? That is every two weeks, if you do it. The trash has to be taken care of. This was a place where worms infested the garbage and fires burned constantly. Worms were everywhere in this garbage dump – and the fire burned constantly. Jesus alluded to these strange words, picked up from Isaiah 66:24 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 represented both internal and external pain. Hell will be a place of unbearable and unending torment reserved for those who refuse to believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, and that salvation and eternal life only comes through Him. He is giving the offer, the invitation. All we need to do is believe.

Words and actions towards others have consequences – some can bear the worst imaginable. I want to suggest to you, I need to suggest to you, that we need to treasure one another and the blessed gift of faith that we have been given, passed down from those who knew Jesus better than anyone – the Apostles. We need to protect each other and lovingly care for one another other, sharing the Apostolic faith, *“the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”* (Jude 1:3) When Jude speaks of the saints – he is speaking of each one of us! The Believers.

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Jude, who was the brother of James, is thought by many to be the brother of Jesus. I will close with these words of caution to us from his one-chapter epistle: "*But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear--hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy--to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*" (Jude 1:17-25)