

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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September 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

It's five weeks till Halloween. Already, people have set skeletons out in their front lawns. Already, large inflatable spiders with green lamps inside lurk over their front doors. It is Halloween season.

The gospel lesson for today seems appropriate for Halloween season. Jesus says some pretty scary things: "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, pluck it out..."

I certainly hope Jesus is not talking about lust when he goes on about this stumbling business. If it's lust then I would have been blind as a bat within fifteen minutes of sitting down next to Leslie Thompson in seventh grade English class. So many more interesting things to look at than Mrs. Nesbit's sentence diagrams up there on the board!

I hope not.

So here is my best take on what Jesus is talking about in the gospel lesson for today. We will start with the end, then go back to the beginning of the teaching, which was last week's gospel lesson. Last week and this week are one single teaching split up between two weeks, one single set of statements from Jesus.

So we begin with the end. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Salt is a rock. No matter what you do to it, it's still salt. You dissolve it in water, still tastes like salt. You boil the water away, there's the salt again at the bottom of the pan. It continues to be what it is.

Salt is a preservative. In Jesus' day you would pack fresh fish in salt, so it did not rot away into a horrible smelling pile of goo. It helped things stay what they truly were.

So, "Have salt in yourselves." Be what you truly are. Don't rot into a pile of horrible smelling goo.

All right, then. What are we? Well, Jesus answered that question last week. Last week, at the beginning of this teaching, Jesus is walking along the road, teaching the disciples that he must be killed and on the third day rise. You may remember that this is who Jesus is. It's what makes him the Messiah.

They get to the house where they are staying and Jesus asks his disciples, "What were you arguing about along the way?" Jesus' disciples don't say anything because they know they're being stupid. They're arguing about who's the greatest.

This is the eternal human argument. Who's the greatest. Who's the most important. If you have a fancier car than me, I have a tendency to think that you are a more important person than me, more valuable, and that I am less valuable, less human. Then I think, "But at least my car is fancier than her car. At least I have a car when these people don't. That makes me better than them."

We may think, I am better because I have a bathroom of my own, my own private toilet. But I might be less human, less valuable as a person if I find out you have a solid gold toilet. Some people do.

Now, tell me this: In what alternate universe does a solid gold toilet do its job more effectively than a regular porcelain toilet? Here's the answer: In no alternate universe of any kind, anywhere, does a solid gold toilet do its job any more effectively than a regular porcelain toilet. But you know what? It does say, "I am better than you."

"Who's the greatest." That's the human struggle, the human way of thinking. That's not the way God thinks.

Jesus gets all his disciples together and says, "Anyone who wants to be great must be a servant, and the leader of all must be the servant of all."

That's God's struggle, God's way of thinking. And it turns our ways of thinking upside down.

Notice Jesus is not servile. He does not engage in servitude. He does not think he is any less of a person than anybody else, but he does serve the light, the truth, the hope, the love which is greater than us all. He does serve God.

So if you go to work in a hospital or medical facility, and maybe you got up to go to work that morning because it was your job, but once you're there, you help the patient to recover from illness or injury, not just because it's your job, but in order to help them recover, as an act of servanthood. You are walking the way of the cross. You are following Jesus.

If you work for a business or manage a business or own one, you provide a product or service which helps people live, or helps them celebrate life. You do your work not just because it's your job, but also you want to contribute to the community, do something for people. You are following Jesus, practicing servanthood.

You connect with your children or grandchildren, spend time with family or friends, not just because you enjoy being with them, because frankly, sometimes we don't enjoy being with family and friends. Sometimes family and friends can drive us batty. But we are there for them because we love them. That's following Jesus. That's the salt that keeps us who we are: servanthood.

Nevertheless, in our gospel lesson for today, the disciples still don't get it. John says to Jesus, "We saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop them because they weren't following us.

Jesus says, "Don't stop them." They don't have to be part of our church, or denomination, our city, our country, our political party, our culture, our way of life, our way of looking at the world. "No one who does a deed of power in my name," that is, in the character of Jesus, attitude of Jesus, the personhood of Jesus, in the way Jesus has of working in the world, "no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak ill of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

So sometimes people do great things. They manage addictions, they confront poverty and hunger, cast out demons in an attitude of servanthood. Don't stop them.

Even when people do little things. “No one who offers you a cup of cold water because you bear the name of Christ will lose the reward.” We do big things and little things out of servanthood.

All right, now comes the scary part. What happens when we forget our servanthood, our salt? Who suffers when we argue about who’s the greatest? It’s the children. It’s the people with less power, less money, less established belonging. They’re the ones who suffer.

Jesus is saying that this is serious. “If any of you put a stumbling block in front of one of these little ones who believe in me, it will be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

This is the sin we need to be afraid of: arguing about who’s the greatest. “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, pluck it out.” We are supposed to be terrified of this constant human argument of who’s the greatest.

“Have salt in yourselves,” says Jesus. Keep yourselves to what you are: servants of the light. “And be at peace among yourselves.”

So let us live as servants of the light, the hope, the truth, the love of God as it comes to us in Jesus. Neither better than nor worse than others. But redeemed by the cross of Christ, which is greater than us all, swept up into God’s healing of the world.