

Well Seasoned Disciples

In the name of him who has placed his Holy Spirit on us, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading from St. Mark picks up right where last week's left off, so a little review is in order to get us situated. Jesus has taken his disciples aside, away from the crowds that come thronging after him. He has some private instruction he wants to give the twelve. Specifically he wants to prepare them for his upcoming arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection. At the same time, he wants to dispel them of the wrong-headed notions they have about what it means to be one of his disciples and a citizen of the kingdom of God. They hear the word "kingdom" and they think of it only in worldly terms. And so their expectations for the future are filled with visions of wealth, fame, authority, glory, and other sumptuous sugarplums and earthly delights. Looking ahead to such prizes and each one trying to make sure he landed for himself a choice position, last week we heard them arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest. Each one was pursuing his own selfish ambition at the expense of the others. And so Jesus had to explain to them that they didn't understand. The kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world in which everyone seeks his own good and advantage. No, quite the opposite: in the kingdom of God greatness is defined by placing others ahead of yourself. Jesus told them that the one who would be great in his kingdom must make himself the least and the servant of all. And of course Jesus would make himself the prime example of this when he served us in the least desirable of ways when he suffered and died for our sins upon the cross.

That was last week's big lesson for the disciples. Our Lord continues this week with four more short lessons, which though brief, pack a lot of punch. The first comes when John speaks up. It's almost as if having been so sharply corrected he wants to prove to Jesus that they're not the bumbling bunch of idiots they appear. No, we really are some good. "Teacher, we saw some guy casting out demons in your name, and we tried to shut him down because he wasn't following us." I'm sure he said it expecting a pat on the back from Jesus. "Good job, men! We can't have just anyone going around using my name to set demonized people free. Why, if everyone were doing it there soon might not be anyone afflicted by demons! We sure wouldn't want that, would we?"

Wait. What? How silly it sounds when expressed that way; but it seems that it was for such a word of approval from Jesus that the disciples were fishing. If so, they failed. "Don't stop him. No one who does a mighty work in my name can soon speak evil of me. Don't you see? He's on our side." It should be obvious: if someone is casting out demons in the name of Jesus, it must be because he's a believer in Jesus. He probably learned it from listening to the disciples who were sent out to preach Christ's kingdom and to cast out demons. That makes him a disciple too. And that he had faith in Jesus is evident from an account that's recorded later in Book of Acts. The seven sons of Sceva had put out their shingle claiming to be exorcists. But when they tried casting out unclean spirits "in name of Jesus whom that fellow Paul preaches" without believing in Jesus themselves, the demons replied, "Yeah, well we know Jesus, and we know Paul; but we sure don't know you." Their patient violently attacked them with superhuman strength. They were forced to flee bruised, bleeding, and naked.

The point is that disciples should be encouraging good works done in the name of Jesus, not opposing them. This is especially applicable in our day when there are so many different expressions of Christianity among the various denominations. To be sure, some have better confessions than others. We can evaluate their doctrines and practices in order to

determine just how theologically sound and biblically truthful they are. Because we love Christ's truth, we must deplore their errors. But it's not our job to shut them down. And to the extent that they are teaching the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus, to the degree that they are proclaiming Christ crucified and the forgiveness of sins in his name, thus releasing people from the bondage of Satan's accusations, to the extent that they are doing other good works in Jesus' name: helping the poor and needy, tending the sick and old, standing up for the sanctity of life and the holiness of marriage, whatever else – these are good things for which we ought to rejoice. And too, with gentleness and respect, we want to dialogue with them in order to help bring them to a fuller understanding of the truth. All of Christ's disciples are somewhere along the path of reaching Christian maturity. We ought to be helping each other toward that goal.

A bit of clarification *is* in order. What I just said doesn't apply quite the same to the false Christian cults that use the name of Jesus but deny essential truths of his Gospel. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, and the Latter Day Saints commonly known as Mormons, they use the name of Jesus to enslave their adherents in soul destroying systems of works righteousness. They remind us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light to deceive many. For whatever good the people trapped in such cults may do in the world, we can give thanks to God; but they can't truly be said to be doing their works in Jesus' name because they don't know who Jesus is. Our goal is to help them hear the true Gospel and trust in the real Jesus.

But among those Christians who do hold to the essential truths of the Gospel, what we don't want to do is to set ourselves up as the exclusive arbiters of God's grace. Yes, there are churches that do this, saying that if you're not one of us then you're really no Christian at all and you have no right to use the name of Jesus. This is what the disciples were doing. And what it is, is an expression of the same jealousy and selfish ambition that drove them to argue with each other about which of them was the greatest. The only difference is that now they were saying it collectively: "We in this group, the chosen twelve, are greater you. Only we are allowed to be the agents of Jesus. Only we have to authority to speak in his name. So don't you dare do it." As we heard, Jesus tells them they're wrong.

And it leads into the next lesson. Jesus says to his disciples, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." Unfortunately, that translation is not very clear. The word that's cast "cause to sin" actually means "to trap", "to trip", or "to cause to stumble". Here it means to do something that harms or impedes someone's faith in Jesus. And certainly causing someone to sin falls into the category, but the idea is much broader than that. In context, the disciples telling the man to stop casting out demons in Jesus' name is what's in mind. Here he is, trusting in Jesus and delivering people from spiritual oppression, and along come the twelve guys whom everybody knows are the closest to Jesus telling him to cease and desist. He's forced to conclude that he's doing something terribly wrong. He's confused. His faith is shaken – all because the disciples are selfishly bent on keeping the power of Jesus under their own control. And the point Jesus is making is that *he's* not the sinner here; you guys are. And your sin against him is serious indeed because it may lead to him to fall from the faith altogether – which is why swimming strapped to a millstone would be better for you. You're better off dead on the bottom of the sea than alive and leading others astray – because so doing the punishments you're earning for yourself are far worse.

Jesus is telling us that our words and actions have the power to affect and influence others. And we need to be aware of how what we say and do (or what neglect to say and do) might undermine, weaken, or otherwise damage the faith of someone who trusts in Jesus. It might be by actually tempting someone to fall into sin, maybe proposing a shady business deal,

an adulterous affair, or inviting them to join in your gossipy character assassination of someone else. These sorts of sins are truly Satanic. There's a reason he's called the tempter. But we're probably guilty of this far more often by the example we set. You present yourself as a disciple of Jesus. You represent him. So, when you misuse the name of the Lord, you're telling others that it's okay for them to do it too. When you avoid the services of God's house, you're announcing to one and to all that it's not important to receive the gifts Jesus gives here. When you bad mouth and show disrespect for our political leaders, you're telling everyone that it's okay to dishonor those whom God has placed in authority. The same is true for all the commandments. The example you set speaks volumes. This is especially the case for parents, teachers, and other leaders who have authority over others. How are you influencing others by your example? Is it leading them to Christ, or away from him? We need to keep the question before us all the time.

Moving on to today's third lesson which is much more personal, Jesus explains why. To make it clearer, I'm going to tweak the translation a bit. He says, "If your hand causes your faith in Christ to stumble, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire." He says the same thing about your feet and your eyes. If they are responsible for causing you to go astray or to lose your trust in Christ, then you're better off getting rid of them than spending eternity in hell "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched". Now, please understand that Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation. He's speaking parabolically in order to stress just how serious the consequences of sin and falling from the faith are. And it's important that we stress it too. So many in our day want to downplay the Scripture's teaching about the fate of those who die without faith in Jesus. Some deny the existence of hell altogether or say that it won't go on forever – that the damned will eventually stop existing. Amazing. They think they know more about it than Jesus. I think we're better off listening to him. He is, after all, the world's foremost authority on life after death.

And what he says about hell is pretty scary. You do not want to go there. And just as you would cut off a limb infected with gangrene to save your life, so also you should seek to remove from your life anything that causes you to become enmeshed in sin or to doubt the words and promises of God in Christ. You see, it's not your hands, your feet, or your eyes that lead you astray. The problem is your sin filled heart. The problem is the influences you allow to get in there. You know what your weaknesses are. You know what temptations you're most likely to fall for. Keep yourself from them. Repent if you fall. And guard, protect, and keep feeding your faith in Christ. Your eternal life depends on it.

Of course, the Lord knows that too. He's on your side. And that brings us to the enigmatic statement that is today's fourth lesson. Jesus says, "Everyone will be salted with fire." What does that mean? To understand, you need to know that in Jesus' day, salt was used for two main purposes. It was, as it is today, a seasoning. Without salt most foods are tasteless and insipid. The presence of salt on food allows you to experience its true character and flavor. Salt was also used as a preservative. We don't use it so much for that today. But back then they didn't have canning or freezing to keep food fresh. To keep food from rotting, especially meat and fish items, you had to pack them in salt.

Jesus tells his disciples that they will be salted with fire. And having just mentioned the unquenchable fires of hell, we want to take fire here as referring to the Lord's lesser judgments, by which I mean the troubles, hardships, and afflictions that come to us in this life. These work for us like salt. First, the Lord uses them to develop our Christian character. To teach us humility, he has to humble us. To teach us patience, he causes us to wait. To teach us compassion for those who suffer, he makes us suffer. To teach us forgiveness, he allows

people to sin against us. And so on. He wants us to be well seasoned disciples, always maturing in faith and Christian virtue. And the way he does it is through the fires he sends us.

But these fires also work to preserve us – preserve us in holy, child-like faith in Jesus. For it's in our afflictions that we see how weak, sinful, and dependent we are, and how much we must cling to the hope we have in the words and promises of a God so gracious and loving that he sent his Son to die for us.

Jesus says this kind of salt is good; but then he asks, "But if the salt has lost its taste, how will you make it salty again?" It's hard for us to imagine salt losing its taste, but it happens that much of the salt used in first century Palestine came from mines near the Dead Sea. The salt there contains impurities, mostly alkali compounds like gypsum – the same stuff they make wallboard out of. Yummy, right? Well, it turns out that with prolonged exposure to the air, these compounds cause the salt to develop a sharp, unpleasant, stale taste. Instead of enhancing the flavor of anything, it ruins it. So, if you lived back then, you'd have to periodically renew your salt supply. And so the Lord does with us. As time goes on, he changes the fires with which he salts us; again, always with a mind to season and develop our Christian character and to preserve us in holy faith.

But then Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves, and be a peace with one another." Here he has in mind what we might think of as the self-inflicted fires of judgment. Not all adversity comes from the outside. We are to create some of our own from within. The salt in you refers to your own self-discipline, your self-mortification, your pursuit to destroy within you the sinful flesh. How? By searching out in yourself the various sins we've seen today in the disciples: pride, self-righteousness, self-exaltation, jealousy, judging and condemning others, wanting to control everything and everyone, causing others to stumble in their Christian faith by temptation or the example you set. The salt in you is your internal struggle with sin – not to overcome it by your own strength and will; but to humbly confess it, and to receive from Jesus his word of assurance that tells you for his sake you have been forgiven. That's what gives you the peace of God that passes all understanding. And that's what enables you to be a well seasoned disciple, daily growing in Christian faith and virtue, and able to be at peace and to gladly serve all who are in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the Lord's gracious will for us. Therefore may we welcome and apply ourselves to the Lord's work to make us his well-seasoned disciples. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!