

# Sermon for Proper 21

## The Text: Mark 9:38-50

Every now and then we come across some words of Jesus which can be easily misunderstood. For example, Jesus seems to suggest it's ok to mutilate your own body and cut off your hands and feet, and pluck out your eyes, especially if these body parts are causing you to sin; which in turn seems to suggest that heaven will be full of armless, legless and blind people! Jesus also seems to suggest we need more salt in our diets just so we can be at peace with each other.

These words of Jesus can be difficult to understand, especially when they're taken out of context. That is, we just won't get what Jesus is trying to say to us when we ignore what's going on before Jesus says these things. So, in order to understand what Jesus is saying, let's remind ourselves what's been going on.

In last week's gospel reading, we heard Jesus tell his disciples he was to be handed over into the hands of men, be killed, and rise again, but they didn't ask him about this because they were afraid. Then, as they were walking down the road, they had an argument about which of the disciples was the greatest. At this point, Jesus took a child into his arms and said if anyone receives a child like this in his name, receives Jesus himself, and if they receive him, they also receive the one who sent him. Across these sayings is the theme of serving humbly.

Then we come to today's text where the eager but slow-to-learn disciples were trying to control who's allowed or not allowed to work in Jesus' name. They told Jesus of the example of someone they didn't know (and probably didn't approve of) who was able to cast out demons – the very thing they failed to do the last time they tried (which is also described earlier in the chapter)! It was a classic case of 'us' and 'them' where if you're not one of 'us' then you must be one of 'them' who doesn't belong and shouldn't share the same privileges, potentially leading to simmering jealousy.

So, despite what Jesus had told them about serving humbly, it seems they were still thinking of themselves as the greatest and so therefore thought themselves in a position to judge and push around others, especially if these 'other' people didn't meet their approval or fit their standards. They were trying to control who was in the 'in' crowd, and who was on the outer; who's acceptable and who's not. It's like one of us judging and criticizing and controlling those who don't quite do things the right way, or more precisely, that they don't do things the way **we** think they should be done: after all, we're right, everyone else is wrong! It's like us deciding who we allow into our little friendship circles and who doesn't get a look in.

So Jesus told them if someone's doing something in his name, that person won't quickly speak evil of Jesus. In that way, even if they're not in the right 'in crowd' with special disciple-approval, and even if they don't do things precisely **our** way, as long as they're not against us, then they're for us. Don't say 'don't' to the one who 'does' in Jesus' name, because even when a person who belongs to Christ offers a drink of water to one of his disciples, they won't lose their reward; remember, the greatest among us are the 'little ones' who humbly serve those

around them. Also, it's Jesus' church, not ours. Let him be the Lord and Judge and Saviour of whom he wants.

Then we come to a strange set of sayings which seem to encourage self-mutilation. If we take Jesus literally, it seems he's saying we should literally cut off our body parts, but if so, Christian churches would be full of maimed people without hands or feet or eyes or ears because we're all sinners. If we had to literally cut off every part of us which sins, there wouldn't be much of us left! Of course, sometimes we don't use the body parts we have to love and serve as we should, but this doesn't mean we should cut them off.

In an effort to make some sense of these sayings, some Christians have wrongly interpreted this to mean it's better to get rid of anyone who sins from our congregations so we may be a perfect little community of saints. But that's not what Jesus is saying here, in fact it's almost the opposite of what he's trying to say.

So what is Jesus saying?

Jesus uses exaggeration to make a comparison and therefore make a powerful point to slow-learning disciples who just don't seem to 'get it'.

Let's look at it this way: what's one of the worst things that can happen to a musician, artist, or mechanic? They could lose their hands. If someone who uses their hands for their enjoyment or work were to have their hand cut off, it would seem like the worst thing that could happen to them. Similarly, if a sporting person was to lose their feet, or a person who loves to read or watch movies were to lose their eyesight, it would seem like that would be the worst thing that could happen to them. Of course, it doesn't mean the end of the world – just look at our Paralympians - but for the individual, losing a limb or a sense or a faculty would be catastrophic.

But Jesus makes the point that there is something worse than losing one of these important limbs or senses or faculties. What's worse than losing any of these things? Causing someone to sin! He says it's better to lose a hand than cause a child to sin. It's better to lose a foot than cause a vulnerable person to sin. It's better to lose your sight than cause a person who is weak in faith to sin. So, what's worse than losing a hand or foot or eye? Causing someone to sin.

So, for all of us who want to be our own boss, who want to get our own way, who want to manipulate or control people around us, who seek to bully people through gossip or yelling abuse, who use emotional blackmail to get what we want, who reckon we know who should be allowed in and who should stay out, or who burden people's consciences through intimidation and coercion, or who lie and steal and deceive in order to protect our reputations - by doing such things, we cause people to sin so they in turn have sinful thoughts and doubt their worth as children of God. They despair of their trust in God's love because God's people don't show that same love. They may attempt to get back at us by also lying, deceiving, abusing, manipulating or controlling. They sin and then that's worse than cutting off our hands and feet or plucking out our eyes!

We often cause people to sin by firstly sinning against them because we make ourselves to be the greatest, the lords of our own destiny, the gatekeepers who decide who's in and who's out, and our own judges, juries and executioners who

push around and punish those around us. Our sins against them don't justify their sins any more than we can justify our own sins against them in the first place.

Perhaps instead of pointing out everyone else's faults and sins and inadequacies, we should first look at how we've sinned against them in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

But Jesus doesn't leave us in despair over our sins and the way we cause others to sin. He says the answer for our sinful state is fire and salt, but not just any fire and salt.

Fire refines and purifies. The 'fire' of the Holy Spirit comes through God's Word and Sacraments to refine and purify us. The Spirit comes to us in baptism to forgive us and purify us to be holy. The Spirit-filled Word of God comes to forgive sinful and selfish people, even those among us who seek to control and manipulate and get our own way. The Holy Spirit works together with Jesus' body and blood to cleanse our tongues, our hearts, and our minds so we may be assured we are forgiven and cleansed and purified, and so we may live as God's holy children in thought, word, and action.

Then, like salt adds flavour and has healing properties, you go out as holy and pure people to 'salt the earth'. While salt in biblical times could lose its properties through contamination, we lose our effectiveness to heal the world and be at peace with those around us when the contamination of our own selfishness, greed, and jealousy make us become stumbling blocks to other people's faith.

Jesus says: *"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another"* (v 50). He tells us this, not because we've lost our saltiness, but to remind us we're salt already. We've been chosen and called and equipped by God through his Word and Sacraments to be the salt we're called to be as we preserve the work of the Holy Spirit in and through us. We're not to be contaminated salt which offends and causes people to stumble, but we're to be purified salt which heals through the peace and forgiveness of Christ. After all, when we forgive one another, we bring purification and peace from God.

St James tells us today how we can be salt for the church and the world. He says, *"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. . . . My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings them back, let them know that whoever brings back a sinner from their wandering will save their soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins"* (James 5:16, 19–20). So in this way, as we learn the joy of being cleansed and free through the forgiveness and purity which comes through faith in Jesus, and by having his pure salt, we also have the opportunity to be the vessel to carry that forgiveness to others.

Remember salt has no power in itself. Our holiness, our forgiveness, our power to forgive others, comes from Christ. He is salt that doesn't lose its saltiness. We're not salt in ourselves, but we receive his salt: the salt of his sweat in Gethsemane, and the salty blood he shed for us. His sweat of obedience and his blood, shed through suffering and death, won our forgiveness, filled us with salt, and has given

us power to do battle against the powers of evil, to purify and cleanse, to flavor and preserve, and to forgive one another.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, live as forgiven and cleansed people made pure by the salt of Christ's forgiveness. Don't put stumbling blocks in people's way which cause them to sin or lead them to despair, but pass on the salt of the forgiveness of Christ so we may heal the world one person at a time. Amen.