

Psalm 19: 7-14, Mark 9: 38-50 Jesus of the Public Domain

Psalm 19: 7-14

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
 the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;  
 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
 the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;  
 the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever;  
 the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;  
 sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
 in keeping them there is great reward.  
 But who can detect their errors?  
 Clear me from hidden faults.  
 Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
 do not let them have dominion over me.  
 Then I shall be blameless,  
 and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
 be acceptable to you,  
 O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared with you how I'd only recently learned the expression of "North Star" as a metaphor for one's guiding principle: an unchanging ideal to follow in one's life," and I thought to myself, "oh, for Christians, Jesus is our North Star."

For Israelites, God's covenant people, the Law of the Lord, God's Torah, was *their* North Star, *as it has seen to this day* for the people of the Jewish faith. It is as if God the Creator of Universe set Torah as the North Star, saying "here, follow this and you'll remain *in* me and *with* me and you'll discover the life I intend for you, life with wisdom, joy, pureness of heart and righteousness. Follow this and you will walk in the path of Life." Through Torah, God reached out and spoke

Love to God's people. Torah is what is essential for humanity to live in peace and harmony with God and with one another in the created world.

The Psalm Rose Marie just read for us is full of praise for God's Torah as it comes in various forms as Instructions, Decrees, Ordinance, Precepts, Commandments...; how they revive the soul, how they are better than money and fine food. But you also heard the Psalmist say, "*by them your servant is warned.*" God's Torah also warns us of the reality of errors and hidden faults we can fall into that undercut the fullness of life God intends for us. So, the Psalm is also a prayer for forgiveness for our errors and hidden faults and for protection from those who cause us to fall into error and away from the path of Life.

God's Torah was the North Star for Jesus, too, who was Jewish. Jesus knew it by heart and lived it to the fullest, following it all the way, till he *became the North Star for us*. So, as we listen to Jesus' words in the Gospel, the Good News for us, this morning, I'd like us to remember this tension that exists, when Jesus teaches us about the path of Life, AND when Jesus warns us about what gets in the way of that path, for you may find his words, how shall I say.... challenging, scandalous, even. Remember that in both instances, Jesus is speaking for the Love of God who so wants us to walk in the path of Life. So, hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark, 9: 38-50.

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because *he was not following us.*' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one *who does a deed of power in my name* will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is *not against us is for us*. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, *cut it off*; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and *to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire*. And if your foot causes you to stumble, *cut it off*; it

is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and *to be thrown into hell.*, And if your eye causes you to stumble, *tear it out*; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and *to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

‘For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt *in yourselves*, and be at peace *with one another.*’

I told you it will be a challenging read, right? It is such a rich passage, but if you’re like me, after hearing it, what stay with you may be just these disturbing images of someone being drowned to the bottom of the sea, and limbs chopped off and eyeballs torn out with blood everywhere, not to mention the fiery hell with undying worms. Not the images I want to serve up to nice people on a Sunday morning, but I’m sorry, Jesus said them. My honest reaction was to say to Jesus, “I know you’re trying to make a point, using the hyperbolic metaphor, which was common in the wisdom sayings in your time and culture, but for us modern readers, it backfires. It’s distracting us from your point. Can’t you tone it down a little?”

Then I could imagine Jesus saying to me, just as he said to Peter when he protested Jesus’ talk about the suffering Messiah, “get behind me Satan.” No, there is no “toning down” of what Jesus means here. Sure, Jesus is not telling us to actually cut-off our limbs and take out our eyes, and “fiery and wormy hell” is not an actual place but a common ancient description of punishments for the wicked. Nonetheless, Jesus is using these severe images because the real consequence of our being a stumbling block to someone who comes to find hope and life in Christ is no less severe, for we would be blocking the Spirit who is at work in each of us personally and as a community. God’s Spirit is God’s love moving through us guiding us back towards Life in this death-dealing world we have made God’s

creation to become, and to block the Spirit is a matter of life or death in all seriousness.

So, with some clarity about those disturbing images, let us return to the scene and see what is happening. As we heard last week, right before this scene, the disciples were arguing who was the greatest among this circle of Jesus' followers. They had just been told whoever wants to be the first has to be the last and be the servant of all. And Jesus placed a little child, one who had no status or power in their world, saying if they welcomed the little one, they welcomed him.

Now, John, a member of the close inner circle of Jesus' disciples, reported to Jesus that they saw someone who was casting out evil spirits using Jesus' name. John said, because he was not part of their inner group, they tried to stop him. John apparently felt that was an "unauthorized use of Jesus' name." Only they, the "official" group of disciples should be able to do that. John seemed to think Jesus's name is copy-righted and he's got the right and this guy did not. John may have only wanted to protect Jesus' name from being abused; maybe he thought to safeguard the identity and integrity of his group as Jesus' followers; or, perhaps... could it be....his sense of his own greatness and importance was threatened by someone who didn't belong to his group and yet believed in Jesus enough to do the deeds of power.

At any rate, Jesus is perfectly fine with his name being in the Public Domain to be used by anyone who would do good work, saving, healing, life-giving work, God's work. For Jesus, it was not someone's claim to a family tie to Jesus that mattered, it was not the formal affiliation as his disciples that mattered; what mattered to him was that they did the will of God; they followed the North Star, the spirit of God's Torah. Whoever did so, belonged to the true community of disciples.

Then using those harsh images that we talked about earlier, Jesus admonishes anyone who would hinder the growth of a little one, by that Jesus means not the little child anymore but a newer follower of Jesus's way, those whose faith is younger. Jesus is talking about how we treat those who believe in him but are not on the same page as us. We, the Christians who are of many different denominations face this situation all the time, especially in this country where people have fled religious persecution at home.

Then Jesus goes on with those images of hand and foot and eye, and how it is better to do away with the parts that are causing the body to go against God's will, and remain alive than to have the whole body with rotten parts. Have salt in ourselves that prevents us from rotting. Using a common ancient metaphor of a body for a social group, Jesus is not talking about just individual disciples but the community of Jesus' followers as a whole body. Jesus is teaching us how to be a Church together, with people at different places on their faith journey... all following Jesus, our North Star. Don't be a scandal to their faith!

And here is the tension. On one hand, Jesus urges disciples to be inclusive of all those who follow him. On the other hand, Jesus emphasizes the very real need not to tolerate anything that resists God's will if the whole community is to be alive in God. The meekness of Jesus to welcome the little ones and his sternness to rebuke our penchant for excluding those who are not like us, that is, his open-mindedness and the rigor of his demands are not opposed to one another. It is always one and the same Lord that speaks and he speaks out of Love.

I've had the privilege of volunteering for the Albuquerque Police Department's Chaplain Unit, under the leadership of Head Chaplain Barb. As a general rule, we are called when there has been an unattended death, and the family members request a chaplain or when the police officer thinks that a chaplain would be helpful. Our main role is to stay with those who have just lost a loved

one as they wait for the Office of Medical Investigator, bringing comfort by our non-anxious presence; it's a ministry of presence and compassion.

In my experience, often times, the officers or the OMI, the medical examiners, do such a good job bringing comfort by their compassionate and caring ways. See, John the disciples trying to stop an outsider from casting out demons in Jesus's name is like a chaplain going over to the officer or OMI who is doing a great job of bringing comfort and try to stop them, saying, hey, that's my job, I'm the chaplain. Of course, we don't do that; we are always grateful when the officers or OMI are so compassionate in what they do.

On the other hand, the Chaplain Unit as a faith community is a body with many parts, and sometimes some parts do fall in error or hidden faults become exposed. Sometimes it is more than just a misunderstanding or a simple mistake, but some deeper tendency that undermines the work of the Spirit through the Chaplain Unit. Our Unit is stretched quite thin and losing a chaplain would be like losing a hand and a foot and an eye, but the Head Chaplain must make the hard decision of letting that part go, so the Unit can remain "salty" and effective to do God's work.

So, what is it that we as the church need to let go to stay salty? Are there parts in us as the body of Christ that need to be removed lest we cause others to stumble? In our discernment, let us look to the Spirit of God's Torah, the Word of God, following our North Star Jesus the Christ. Amen