

³⁸John said to [Jesus], “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For 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.

⁴²“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. ⁴³If 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. ⁴⁵And 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. ⁴⁷And 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, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt 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.”

From pre-school to graduate school, classrooms offer fascinating and memorable interactions between students and teachers. This is especially true when a student blurts out something that effectively puts their foot in their mouth. For example, I recall one day in a class that was taught by my college advisor, Dr. Paul Weber. Some of you may remember that he came to All Saints last year to lead us in a hymn-sing event. There had been a class assignment, and Dr. Weber wasn't satisfied with our submissions. I remember him calmly yet firmly explaining to us the importance of this work. The essence of his message was that we are now adults who need to take on the responsibilities of our coursework. We needed to prioritize completing our assignments in a

satisfactory way. It was a minute or two of us taking in a message that we needed to hear, even if we didn't like hearing it. Doctor Weber wasn't expecting a response from us, so we could have just soaked in the message, and soon we'd get back to the work of the day. However, when Dr. Weber reached his conclusion, one of my classmates decided she should chime in with her excuse, and I quote, "I didn't have time last night because I had a sorority event." I remember the other students making a collective groan, my face fell into my palm, and Dr. Weber began to make his same point again, only this time in a far, far more animated manner.

I share that story because that is exactly what is happening in our gospel lesson today. The unfortunate thing is that the lectionary splits the story across two Sundays. The calmly-delivered teaching of Jesus was read last Sunday, and today the lesson begins with the disciple John blurting out something that shows he's not getting the point. The remainder of the passage is Jesus hammering home his original teaching in a far, far more animated manner.

Let's highlight last week for a minute. Jesus and the disciples were walking to Capernaum. Once they arrived at their host's home, he asked the disciples what they were arguing about on the road. They kept quiet, because they were arguing about which disciple was the greatest. They must have innately known Jesus would have frowned on it. So he calmly says to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." They remained silent. Jesus then picked up a child in the home and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Note the juxtaposition: the disciples were focused on their greatness, while a child – especially in that age– was viewed as having nothing to contribute. A child was the symbol of powerlessness in that society. We should also note the sacramental overtones that Jesus is employing: we welcome the presence of Jesus – and we welcome the presence of God – when we welcome people who are powerless. That is a revolutionary thought. It ought to make everyone reassess all of their social interactions. This thought is also central to Christian ethics: we should intentionally welcome people who have no power and who are cast aside by the broader society.

It is truly revolutionary, and the lesson could have ended there. Yet... John opens his mouth. "Teacher, there was a guy who was casting out demons in your name. He wasn't following any of us

twelve, so we told him to get lost.” Does John seriously expect a pat on the back for this? This is his “I had a sorority event” moment! He clearly has not been paying attention to Jesus’ message. I would hope that at least one of the other eleven did a facepalm, but that might be expecting too much of them. This little tale is an admission that they don’t – or won’t – comprehend the point of Jesus’ message of power dynamics in discipleship.

Jesus offers a quick response to this tale, saying “Don’t stop him.... Whoever is not against us is for us,” before moving on to some gruesome imagery of cutting off body parts. Let’s be clear: Jesus did not mean for anyone to take this part literally. This is his “far, far more animated” retelling of the message that his followers are to welcome people who are powerless. Also, his comments about “hell” here are not to be conflated with the later medieval concepts of “hell” that often come to mind. The word he uses time again here is “Gehenna,” which is an actual valley on the south side of Jerusalem. I’ve been there. Several centuries prior to Jesus, a non-Jewish tribe performed horrendous child sacrifices there. That ended when the kingdom of Judah took control, yet the tales of the horrors that took place at Gehenna passed from one generation to the next. Since no one wanted to go there, the valley became Jerusalem’s trash dump, and to keep the trash and its fumes under control, it was lit on fire. This resulted in Gehenna’s continuous smoldering. So by the time of Jesus, the valley was legendary for its eeriness; a place of untold human horrors and lingering flames. To mention Gehenna like Jesus did was the equivalent of a sleepover story about that creepy old mansion on the outskirts of town, where supposedly anyone who enters never exits. In other words, Jesus was using scare tactics to get his disciples to pay attention to his teaching.

Which gets us back to his original message about welcoming people who are powerless in society. Powerless people, like children, who have nothing to offer. People who have been cast aside. People who were kicked out of their parents’ house. People who have fled violence or starvation and now have nothing but the shirt on their back. Those are “the little ones” who Jesus is concerned about. Jesus is still talking about their situation and whether his disciples will welcome them when he says, “it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” He is issuing a warning against Christians who would cast aside people who are powerless in order to prop up people who already have social power. When he says it would be

better to cut off a hand, cut off a foot, or tear out an eye and be tossed into Gehenna, he isn't referring to petty little individual sins like lust. Jesus is saying that when someone couldn't care less about the little ones, it imperils that person's connection to God, because – remember – welcoming those little ones allows us to welcome God. His point is to emphatically state the consequences if his disciples do not welcome powerless people.

Christians are to do everything within our power to welcome people who have been shoved aside or who are powerless in this world: children, marginalized minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ folk, refugees, and the list goes on. Welcoming them is supposed to be central to who we are as Christians, because the act of welcoming them is the act of welcoming Jesus. The point of Jesus saying body parts should be cut off is that if there are voices telling Christians to not be welcoming of people who need it, then the Christian community needs to figuratively cut off those voices, because they are leading us away from an encounter with God. That can be a hard word to accept, because none of us – including myself – are close to perfect at prioritizing the least powerful people. This whole passage was a hard word, likely spoken with some anger, to the twelve disciples who just... weren't... getting it. Jesus only stated it this way because John proved the disciples didn't get the message the first time. The fact that the angry-part made it into the gospel's final cut should show us the importance of this teaching. The message of welcome is good news. For everyone. God welcomes us, and therefore we should be welcoming. Not just of the people who carry power. Not just of the people who make us comfortable. There is something holy... something sacramental... about welcoming someone who has been cast aside, about welcoming someone whose presence challenges us and makes us feel a little uncomfortable. Notice how Jesus finishes his lesson; "be at peace with one another." This peace is not the mere absence of hostility. It is the presence of dignity, respect, equity and shalom within a community. A community centered on that kind of welcome is how we open ourselves to encounters with the divine.

Amen.