

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 27, 2015  
Year B, Proper 21

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Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22  
James 5:13-20  
Mark 9:38-50

Jesus said, “If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.” In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is one of the more gruesome passages in what we refer to as the Good News of Jesus Christ. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.” (My irreverent mind conjures up an image of a person with very long arms, for how else could one’s hand cause one to stumble?) So what gets Jesus going on this terrible theme of amputations and eye plucking? It is the idea of stumbling. The Greek word for putting a stumbling block in front of someone is “skandalizo,” to scandalize. Jesus gets impassioned about this because he hates to see anything get in the way of people getting closer to God. “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.” Think how despicable an act Jesus is describing. A little one is laboring to make progress, and a bully sticks out his foot to trip the little one. A blind man is stumbling along with his white cane, and someone puts a cinder block right in front of him. A person whom society rejects is doing the best they can to build human relationships of virtue and loyalty, and the church says that their efforts are not to be recognized or supported. A person who has given over her life to Jesus seeks to nurture

that relationship with deeper knowledge of the scriptures and the fellowship of others as committed as she, and others in the Church regard her as a fanatic.

Jesus will not stand for it. People who trip up kids deserve to end up in the East river with cement shoes on. And it applies to our own interior lives as well. Those things in our own lives that interfere with our progress toward God also need to end up at the bottom of the sea. If we are going to travel far, we have to travel light. If something gets in the way, get rid of it. The criterion for making judgments about what is valuable and what is not, or what is important and what is not, is whether it helps or hinders our relationship with God and each other.

The passage starts with a scandal or stumbling block of the disciples themselves. The disciples smugly reporting that they had stopped a man from casting out demons because he wasn't part of their group. Jesus cuts through this all too human and common foolishness. "Whoever is not against us is for us." Now it is not quite as simple as saying that, as long as you are doing good, it does not matter what your ultimate commitments are. This very liberal statement of Jesus is bracketed by the qualification that the deed must be done in the name of Christ. The whole saying is, "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. 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." The objection raised by the apostles was not that these good deeds were being done in the name of some other authority, but because the practitioners were not part of their group.

The guy didn't have the right credentials or hadn't gone to the right school. As Ed Gadoski put it in the Bible Study this week, he wasn't a member of the union.

There is another text in Matthew, which appears, at first sight, to be the inverse of this. In our reading today from Mark, Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." In Matthew 12:30, Jesus says, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." At first one might say simply that this is another instance of Scripture contradicting itself. As always, though, it is important to look at the context. In Mark, Jesus is defending others who are casting out demons in Jesus' name from expulsion by his disciples. In Matthew, Jesus himself has been accused by the Pharisees of casting out demons by the power of the devil. Cynically, one might argue that it is all very well for others to do good in his name, but when Jesus is attacked himself, his is suddenly far less liberal. "Whoever is not with me is against me."

It seems to me, however, that these two sayings are in fact consistent. In both cases Jesus is saying that the action itself and its authority need to be judged together. In today's lesson, the good deed is being done in the name of Christ, and that is what matters. The fact that the practitioners were not part of the inner circle should not matter. In the case in Matthew, the Pharisees see the good works and attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil, because Jesus is not part of the professional fellowship of the Pharisees. What makes Jesus furious is not so much the attack on himself, although that must have been frustrating, but the self-serving and willful blindness that will not see the deeds that are the work of the Holy Spirit as such. If you can't see the God's own direct miracles as evidence of God's presence, then you cannot be saved. But what the Pharisees

and the apostles are both saying is that, if people do not have the correct credentials, if they do not belong to the right group, then it does not matter what good they are doing. They need to be stopped. They need to be prevented from doing more good, lest others get confused about who are the good guys.

This is dumb. In both instances, Jesus asks of the Pharisees, of his own disciples, and of us, that we “Judge with a right judgment.” This is important to Jesus, not because he needs to defend his own honor or reputation. This is not important to Jesus because of the need to have a consistent theological base before good works can be done. No. Jesus is far more pragmatic. Jesus only cares about whether people are being helped to get closer to God or hindered. "

We always need to be alert to our tendency to put stumbling blocks in each other's way. As in any community, there are times when a person may get on one's nerves, or say something thoughtless that hurts. Sometimes we get frustrated when someone doesn't do something the way we would or takes on a task in a way that feels like interference or judgment. We need always remember that in this community of St. Michael's the way we treat each other is always more important than getting the task done. We put each other ahead of ourselves. There is a very fine summer camp on the shores of Lake Champlain called Camp Dudley. I never went there, but a number of my cousins did. They have a slogan that every boy who ever went there remembers: Put the other fellow first. Let us not be a stumbling block for someone. Let us think of the impact our words and actions may have. Let us read the email again before hitting the send button.

The passage ends with a very New Englandy saying. "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." We need to be full of the flavor God gave each of us. We need to be the wonderful individual characters God made us to be. And we need to put the other fellow first. Let us have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with one another.