

On the surface, and especially to the modern ear, this text can sound a tad bit harsh. Before we seek to dissect its contents, I want to offer three points for your consideration.

First, status is always at play in Mark's gospel, and indeed in every gospel. The gospel writers name twelve disciples. We would be foolish to believe there weren't more. We know of many women, some named, but many unnamed, who learned and modeled the Jesus way for others. And if Jesus was and is as transformative as we believe, then he would have had hundreds, even thousands of brief interactions with people who channeled his spirit. The Samaritan and Syrophenician women, as well as the Centurion come to mind. But the named disciples, at least in today's text, are still living in a world that tells them their status and power as members of Jesus' inner circle are exclusive. Just last week they were arguing over who among them was the greatest! Suddenly, they see other people healing and ministering in the name of Jesus, and they feel threatened.

Second, not every mention of hell is created equal. Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, is an area that surrounds the city of Jerusalem. It is believed to be a place where followers of Baal, some of whom were also kings of Judea, ritually sacrificed children. Gehenna is synonymous with wickedness and unrighteousness. When you hear mention of hell in today's text, I would urge you to hear it as a very specific, tangible, and contextual antonym of God's kingdom, and not as the broader concept of damnation that has developed in the past two millennia.

Third, we are all created as children of God. God's value, dignity, love, potential, and creativity are all fused in our DNA. Jesus spent his life affirming the humanity of others by loving God and loving neighbor. Jesus believed that God's kingdom – the manifestation of God's love, potential, and presence in the present – is born out in the intentional recognition of our shared createdness. Therefore, God's kingdom is realized in the preservation, and indeed fulfillment of life.

So...in today's lection we have disciples with earthly egos, a landmark synonymous with wickedness, and an enduring purpose steeped in the preservation of life. Let's jump in.

The lection begins. The disciples see other folks performing acts of healing and goodness in the name of Jesus. And as any good church-goer would do, they tell these heathens: "You can't heal our pledges! Only we can heal our pledges!" No wait that was *Animal House*.

The disciples want these non-licensed disciples to cease and desist, because they still believe there's not enough room, not enough status, not enough to go around for others to lead. You might say the disciples display similar feelings to the Scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees who opine the healing activities of the unlicensed Jesus. And before we all get too judgmental, let's consider something. There must be more than 1,000 churches in our city, and I bet everyone of them has a food pantry or a benevolence fund. Now imagine one of those sister churches, perhaps one with significantly different theological tenets than ours. Do we really begrudge their acts of kindness and healing toward neighbors in need? Are they our enemies? Is our understanding and application of the Jesus way the only acceptable expression of beloved community?

I think Jesus is trying to tell the disciples, and us as well, that we can't let our expression of discipleship be a barrier that precludes the value and potential of expressions that differ from our own. God can, has, and does work through all people, and God's power, spirit, and presence are not diluted by increased and varied participation. To stymie the created potential of any of God's children, and especially those who are child-like in their expression of discipleship, is to stymie one's own life and potential. Denying the createdness of others doesn't buoy you, it sinks you deep in the water.

In Jesus' day, and in ours, too, the powers that be seduce us with words like most, and first, and best. Consumption of things, and, privilege, and

recognition prevent us from assuming more fulfilling elements: love, connection, community, humanity, etc. What good is your hand if it only snatches blindly to ensure it's got its share? What good is your foot if it's so consumed on being at the front of the line it tramples over every meaningful relationship in its path to get there? What good is an eye if it doesn't have the ability to see into the hearts and minds of its neighbors? Jesus reminds us that we must remove those things in our lives that prevent us from living into the presence of God.

Jesus powerfully juxtaposes Gehenna with the Kingdom of God. Gehenna was a place where life was valued so little, that children were discarded. And the fires burned day and night, but they weren't refining, cleansing fires, they were fires of destruction. All of this sacrifice and destruction was performed in the hopes of sustaining inequitable, violent domination systems. Wholeness cannot exist in such a place. Jesus understands God's kingdom as something that transcends the physical. For we can only truly see one another, hold one another, run toward one another, if we experience one in another God's light.

Jesus closes by asking us to avoid being the kind of substance that is destroyed by fire or loses its saltiness. The flame of God's light burns in a way that purifies and restores others, makes them stronger. The salt of God's love enhances and preserves their giftedness.

Jesus tells us to be salt. That is, Jesus tells us to care for, and love one another in ways that preserve life. We serve one another. We share with one another. We don't seek to be THE best, or to have THE most, we seek to discover the best of God in each one of us, and to share the most of our gifts with our neighbors.

I think the worship quote Kathryn shared with us this week is a great place to close our reflection on this passage. Anne Osdieck asks, "Who is for us?" And she hears Jesus answer:

Receiving the Cup of Others
Bob Stillerman
18th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 21, 9/26/2021
Mark 9:38-50



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

Anyone who extends a helping hand,
who shelters the homeless,
who cares for the earth,
who feeds the hungry,
teaches the ignorant,
stands for justice,
gives a cup of water
in my name
is all for us,
and belongs to me.

I also hope it's not lost on you that the arrangement of these words are presented in the silhouette of a chalice. It sounds like to me, Sardis, that there are some salty, fiery disciples among us, and around us, and even scattered here and there. May we be a people who recognizes the cup of Christ, be willing to receive it when it's ladled for us, and be intentional in offering its refreshment to others. And may such a cup give us eyes to see, and hands to hold, and feet to run toward the living God. Amen.