

“Season” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
October 7, 2018, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 9:38-50

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Jesus sure covers a range of concepts and ideas in today’s reading from Mark! Casting out demons, stumbling blocks with dire consequences, hell, fire, salt. That’s a wide range of topics all in these few verses of scripture. What questions have these verses raised for you? (Pause and take questions.)

Today, I’ll try to mix explanations of concepts or ideas that are presented in this scripture along with looking at what Jesus is teaching in the scripture.

The disciples complained to Jesus that others were casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Do any of you have questions about casting out demons? There’s a tension between the healing ministry of Jesus and how we think about demons today. Some people today do not believe that demons exist. If they don’t exist, then what did Jesus do when he healed people who had demons and why did demons talk to Jesus and say they knew who Jesus was?

Jesus’ healing ministry illustrates God’s power to heal, to make people whole. In the Bible we read stories where demons robbed people of a normal life. Jesus restored those people to a life, free of the demon that possessed them. Jesus said, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** (John 10:10)

Many people today do believe that demons exist and are thankful for Jesus’ power to cast them out.

Where do demons come from? Are demons evil? If they are evil, then did God create them? No, God did not create evil. Evil is explained in the old testament as fallen angels, those that rebelled against God and were thrown out of God’s presence. These fallen angels account for demons.

If needed, insert evil explanation here.

I said the disciples complained to Jesus that others were casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Why were they complaining? I loved this picture. This was really the attitude of the disciples. The disciples were trying to set themselves apart from others, as the only ones who knew the way to salvation. They were Jesus’ favorite. This is really an issue about who’s in and who’s out. The disciples complained about people who were doing good work who were not a part of their group. Jesus tells the disciples the people they were complaining about are a part of God’s family as Jesus defined it.

At this point in the scripture, I wonder if Jesus looked at the disciples and saw the puzzled expression on their face. Perhaps Jesus knew the disciples weren’t grasping

what he was saying. So, Jesus provides another illustration – an illustration that is quite vivid, exaggerated, to try to get his teaching across to the disciples.

Jesus tells the disciples not to be a stumbling block. If we were to say something like that today, we'd say don't criticize others who believe in Jesus because they don't do things the Presbyterian way. Jesus goes on to talk about what will happen if someone acts as a stumbling block. Jesus mentions drowning in the ocean with a millstone holding you down. Jesus mentions cutting off body parts if they cause you to be a stumbling block to others. Jesus used very vivid language to get his point across. Jesus really doesn't want you to cut off any body parts, this is just the way he is teaching to get his point across. Another example of Jesus' teaching using such a vivid example is the story Jesus told about the person who points out a speck in another's eye who should first remove the log from that person's eye.

For us today, the question is what stumbling blocks do we put in people's way? Some churches believe that a person has to be baptized before he or she can receive communion? Some churches believe that you have to be baptized in their church by their minister even if you've already been baptized. The list goes on.

As a part of Jesus' teaching about stumbling blocks, Jesus mentions being thrown into hell. Some of you may have wondered about hell. Jesus is not talking our society's cartoonish idea of hell as a place where the devil lives, the devil with red horns and a pitchfork. The word Jesus used to describe hell would have been understood by all who heard it. Jesus was most likely talking about a physical place outside Jerusalem where garbage and dead bodies were burned up. Probably there was a continuous fire burning in this garbage dump. This place was called by the Hebrew people, Gehenna. Those listening to Jesus would understand his words about the fire never being quenched. Those listening would not want to be thrown into that garbage dump! By using this imagery, Jesus helped the people understand the dangers of not living as Jesus taught.

Today, the concept of hell is usually understood as separation from God after death.

Jesus wraps up his teaching on a more positive note: **“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”** Salt can flavor food. Salt can preserve food. Exchanging salt, a valuable commodity in Jesus' day, was another story behind this verse.

Hebrew men carried a small pouch of salt. When two or more men would enter into what was called a salt covenant, the parties to the covenant would mix their salt in a common bowl, break bread, dip it into the salt, and eat it. When they were finished they would redistribute the salt into their pouches. The only way to break the covenant would be to separate each grain of salt from the others and return it to the original owner. Since this was impossible, the established bond had to remain forever! This is the story behind Jesus' statement about being at peace with each other.

Salt also adds flavor. If you honor others, if you avoid putting stumbling blocks in people's way, if you give a cup of water to drink, you are adding flavor to the body of Christ, to the church. If we don't do those things, then we've lost our saltiness. We're no longer seasoning for Christ.

Salt also preserves. When Linda and I visited President Andrew Jackson's home near Nashville, TN, we saw a large wooden box that was used to preserve meat in salt. There were no refrigerators or freezers, so meat was preserved by mixing salt and meat in this large wooden box.

When I think about Christ-followers as being salt, I think of doing good works, of helping others know God's love for them, of working at the church, of being involved in the community. All these preserve the faith for today and for future generations.

We've looked at what prompted Jesus to teach the disciples about not being stumbling blocks. Along the way, we've explained a few concepts: demons, hell and salt that Jesus used to teach. So, what's the takeaway for today? When we look at these verses we find one common thread – don't do anything to obstruct the path of those who are also Christ-followers. Don't put stumbling blocks in the way of those who want to serve Jesus. Think of faith in Jesus as inclusive. Be careful that your actions and thoughts are not exclusive. No one has a corner on the market. If you follow Jesus' teachings in this scripture from Mark, you will add seasoning to the faith – your faith and the faith of others.

May God bless your every effort.